THE CRPG BOOK

A Guide to Computer Role-Playing Games

Expanded Edition

Thank you for purchasing one of our books.
Please enjoy this complementary digital PDF.

This PDF has been designed to be best viewed with Adobe Acrobat, which can be freely downloaded for Mac and PC here: https://www.adobe.com

The default view is set to single pages. If you would prefer to view as spreads, this can be done by navigating the 'View' menu and then to 'Page Display'. From here, select 'Two Page Display'. Then also make sure 'Show Cover Page in Two Page View' is ticked. To revert back to single pages, simply go through the same process and tick 'Single Page View' instead.

Please note that this PDF is the copyright of Bitmap Books Limited and should not be distributed without permission. All editing, copying and printing has been disabled from this file.

We hope you enjoy!

The CRPG Book:

A Guide to Computer Role-Playing Games

Expanded Edition

Edited by Felipe Pepe
Published by Bitmap Books

This book is the result of nine years of work
and the collaboration of 167 volunteers.

We hope that you enjoy it.

Contents

Introduction 6
The goal of this Expanded Edition 8
About the project 9
Contributors 10

Articles & Guides 16
Using this book 18
FAQs 19
What is an Old-School RPG? 20
Ports: Far beyond resolution and FPS 22
Unplayable 26
Cartography 28
From Prussia with love: The origin of RPGs 30
The PLATO RPGs 32

The Reviews 36
1975–1979: The beginning of the digital invasion 38
Beneath Apple Manor 40
Dungeon Campaign 42
Dunjonquest: Temple of Apshai 44
Akalabeth: World of Doom 46

1980–1984: The boom, the clones and the crash 48
Eamon 50
Rogue 52
Wizardry: Proving Grounds of the Mad Overlord 54
Ultima 56
Dragon's Eye 58
Dungeons of Daggorath 59
Telengard 60
Ultima II: Revenge of the Enchantress 61
The Caverns of Freitag 62
Tunnels of Doom 63
Moria 64
The Return of Heracles 66
Ultima III: Exodus 68
Questron 70
Adventure Construction Set 72

1985–1989: Here come the new challengers 74
Wizard's Crown 76
The Bard's Tale 78
Alternate Reality: The City 80
Phantasie 82
Ultima IV: Quest of the Avatar 84
Autoduel 86
Rings of Zilfin 87
Might and Magic: Book I - Secret of the Inner Sanctum 88
Starflight 90
Alter Ego 92
Quarterstaff 93
Ys: The Vanished Omens 94
Deathlord 96
Wizardry IV: The Return of Werdna 97
NetHack 98
The Faery Tale Adventure 100
Dungeon Master 102
Zeliard 104
Alien Fires 2199 A.D. 105
Wasteland 106
Omega 108
Neuromancer 109
Pool of Radiance 110
Star Saga: One: Beyond the Boundary 112
Wizardry V: Heart of the Maelstrom 113
Ultima V: Warriors of Destiny 114
BattleTech: The Crescent Hawk's Inception 116
Dragon Wars 117
Prophecy I: The Fall of Trinadon 118
Drakkhen 119
The Magic Candle 120
Hillsfar 122
Castle of the Winds 123
Quest for Glory: So You Want to Be a Hero 124
The Dark Heart of Uukrul 126
Windwalker 127
Knights of Legend 128

Bloodwych 130
B.A.T. 131

1990–1994: The creative and technological explosion 132
Ultima VI: The False Prophet 134
The Immortal 136
Elvira: Mistress of the Dark 137
Wizardry VI: Bane of the Cosmic Forge 138
Tunnels & Trolls: Crusaders of Khazan 140
Circuit's Edge 141
J.R.R. Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings, Vol. I 142
Captive 144
Champions of Krynn 145
MegaTraveller: The Zhodani Conspiracy 146
Spirit of Excalibur 148
Worlds of Ultima: The Savage Empire 150
Escape from Hell 151
Eye of the Beholder 152
Cobra Mission: Panic in Cobra City 154
Knights of Xentar 155
Moraff's World 156
Fate: Gates of Dawn 157
Disciples of Steel 158
Might and Magic III: Isles of Terra 160
Worlds of Ultima: Martian Dreams 161
The Bard's Tale Construction Set 162
Gateway to the Savage Frontier 163
Realms of Arkania: Blade of Destiny 164
Ultima Underworld: The Stygian Abyss 166
Might and Magic: World of Xeen 168
Legend 170
The Summoning 171
UnReal World 172
Ultima VII: The Black Gate 174
Ishar: Legend of the Fortress 176
Wizardry VII: Crusaders of the Dark Savant 178
Black Crypt 180
Shadowlands 181
Star Control 2 182
Darklands 184
Amberstar 186
Ambermoon 187
Quest for Glory: Shadows of Darkness 188
ShadowCaster 190
Perihelion: The Prophecy 191
Princess Maker 2 192
Veil of Darkness 194
BloodNet 195
Betrayal at Krondor 196
The Legacy: Realm of Terror 198
Hired Guns 199
Dark Sun: Shattered Lands 200
Lands of Lore: The Throne of Chaos 202
Dungeon Hack 203
Forgotten Realms: Unlimited Adventures 204
Ultima VIII: Pagan 206
ADOM - Ancient Domains of Mystery 208
Al-Qadim: The Genie's Curse 210
Superhero League of Hoboken 211
Realmz 212
The Elder Scrolls: Arena 214

1995–1999: New 3D worlds and new audiences 216
Witchaven 218
CyberMage: Darklight Awakening 219
Ravenloft: Stone Prophet 220
Exile: Escape from the Pit 222
World of Aden: Thunderscape 224
Entomorph: Plague of the Darkfall 225
Mordor: Depths of Dejenol 226
Albion 228
Stonekeep 230
Strife: Quest for the Sigil 231
Anvil of Dawn 232
Dungeons & Dragons: Shadow over Mystara 233
Odyssey: The Legend of Nemesis 234
The Elder Scrolls II: Daggerfall 236
Birthright: The Gorgon's Alliance 238
An Elder Scrolls Legend: Battlespire 239
Diablo 240
Fallout: A Post-Nuclear Role-Playing Game 242
Lands of Lore II: Guardians of Destiny 244
Dink Smallwood 245
Final Fantasy VII 246
Betrayal in Antara 248
Return to Krondor 249
Rage of Mages 250
Descent to Undermountain 252
Hexplore 253
Baldur's Gate 254
Might and Magic VI: The Mandate of Heaven 256
Fallout 2 258
King's Quest: Mask of Eternity 260
Septerra Core: Legacy of the Creator 261
Jagged Alliance 2 262
Planescape: Torment 264
Ultima IX: Ascension 266
Konung: Legend of the North 268
Might and Magic VII: For Blood and Honor 270
Gorky 17 271
Omikron: The Nomad Soul 272
System Shock 2 274
Silver 276
Soulbringer 277

2000–2004: The rise of the modern gaming industry 278
Deus Ex 280
Baldur's Gate II: Shadows of Amn 282
Siege of Avalon 284
Might and Magic VIII: Day of the Destroyer 285
Diablo II 286
Vampire: The Masquerade - Redemption 288
Summoner 290
Wizards & Warriors 291

Evil Islands: Curse of the Lost Soul 292
Icewind Dale 294
Wizardry 8 296
Anachronox 298
Arcanum: Of Steamworks & Magick Obscura 300
Gothic 302
Severance: Blade of Darkness 304
Geneforge 306
Pool of Radiance: Ruins of Myth Drannor 308
ZanZarah: The Hidden Portal 309
Divine Divinity 310
The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind 312
Arx Fatalis 314
Icewind Dale II 316
Might and Magic IX 317
Neverwinter Nights 318
Neverwinter Nights: Aurora Toolset & Modules 320
Freedom Force 322
Dungeon Siege 324
Gothic II 326
Prince of Qin 328
Pyrrhic Tales: Prelude to Darkness 329
Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic 330
The Battle for Wesnoth 332
Lionheart: Legacy of the Crusader 333
Space Station 13 334
TRON 2.0 336
SpellForce: The Order of Dawn 338
Temple of Elemental Evil 340
Deus Ex: Invisible War 342
Kult: Heretic Kingdoms 343
Sacred 344
Fable 346
Space Rangers 2: Dominators 348
Sudeki 350
The Bard's Tale 351
Vampire: The Masquerade - Bloodlines 352
The Legend of Heroes: Trails in the Sky 354
Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic II - The Sith Lords 356

2005–2009: The peak of AAA & the casual revolution 358
Super Columbine Massacre RPG! 360
Jade Empire 362
Boiling Point: Road to Hell 364
Fate 366
Titan Quest 367
Dwarf Fortress 368
Swords and Sandals: Gladiator 370
The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion 372
Dungeon Crawl: Stone Soup 374
SpellForce 2: Shadow Wars 376
Sengoku Rance 377
Gothic 3 378
Neverwinter Nights 2 380
Age of Pirates: Caribbean Tales 382
Dark Messiah: Might and Magic 384
Mass Effect 386
Puzzle Quest: Challenge of the Warlords 388
Recettear: An Item Shop's Tale 389
S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow of Chernobyl 390
Neverwinter Nights 2: Mask of the Betrayer 392
Agarest: Generations of War 394
Elona 395
The Witcher 396
7.62 High Calibre 398
Eschalon: Book I 400
Hellgate: London 402
Barkley, Shut Up and Jam: Gaiden 403
The Last Remnant 404
Valkyria Chronicles 405
Fallout 3 406
Drakensang: The Dark Eye 408
Fortune Summoners: Secret of the Elemental Stone 410
Seventh Sense 411
Mount & Blade 412
Neverwinter Nights 2: Storm of Zehir 414
Divinity II: Ego Draconis 415
Dragon Age: Origins 416
Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War II 418
Venetica 419
Risen 420
Torchlight 422
Yumina the Ethereal 424
Marauder 425
Knights of the Chalice 426
Epic Battle Fantasy 428

2010–2014: The freedom to play (and create) any game 430
Borderlands 432
Din's Curse 434
Desktop Dungeons 435
Caves of Qud 436
Two Worlds II 438
Cthulhu Saves the World 440
Faery: Legends of Avalon 441
Alpha Protocol: The Espionage RPG 442
Fallout: New Vegas 444
Mass Effect 2 446
Academagia: The Making of Mages 448
Dungeons of Dredmor 449
E.Y.E: Divine Cybermancy 450
Dark Souls 452
The Witcher 2: Assassins of Kings 454
Way of the Samurai 4 456

- The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim 458
- Magical Diary 460
- Dragon Age II 461
- Deus Ex: Human Revolution 462
- Mass Effect 3 464
- Tales of Maj'Eyal 466
- Legend of Grimrock 468
- Kingdoms of Amalur: Reckoning 470
- Dragon's Dogma 472
- Of Orcs and Men 474
- Defender's Quest: Valley of the Forgotten 475
- Diablo III 476
- FTL: Faster Than Light 478
- Paper Sorcerer 479
- Shadowrun Returns 480
- Hyperdimension Neptunia - Re;Birth1 482
- Heroine's Quest: The Herald of Ragnarok 483
- Path of Exile 484
- Cataclysm: Dark Days Ahead 486
- Aarklash: Legacy 487
- Card Hunter 488
- Expeditions: Conquistador 489
- Bound by Flame 490
- Divinity: Original Sin 491
- Might and Magic X 492
- Dream Quest 493
- The Banner Saga 494
- Blackguards 496
- Transistor 497
- NEO Scavenger 498
- Lords of Xulima 500
- Lords of the Fallen 501
- Dragon Age: Inquisition 502
- South Park: The Stick of Truth 504
- Unrest 505
- Wasteland 2 506
- LISA: The Painful 508
- Crypt of the NecroDancer 509

2015–2019: The small screens become the big earners 510

- The Witcher III: Wild Hunt 512
- Hylics 514
- UnderRail 515
- The Age of Decadence 516
- Undertale 518
- Mystery Chronicle: One Way Heroics 519
- Tale of Wuxia 520
- Fallout 4 522
- Sunless Sea 524
- Hand of Fate 525
- Pillars of Eternity 526
- Dex 528
- Sword Coast Legends 529
- Darkest Dungeon 530
- Expeditions: Viking 532
- Salt and Sanctuary 533
- Tyranny 534
- Grim Dawn 535
- NieR: Automata 536
- Divinity: Original Sin 2 538
- West of Loathing 540
- Tower of Time 541
- Nioh 542
- ELEX 544
- SpellForce III 545
- Battle Brothers 546
- Mass Effect: Andromeda 548
- Pyre 549
- Dragon Quest XI: Echoes of an Elusive Age 550
- Torment: Tides of Numenera 552
- The Council 553
- Pillars of Eternity II: Deadfire 554
- Monster Hunter: World 556
- Cultist Simulator 558
- Kenshi 559
- GuJian 3 560
- Kingdom Come: Deliverance 562
- Pathfinder: Kingmaker 564
- Vampyr 566
- Outward 567
- Slay the Spire 568
- GreedFall 570
- The Outer Worlds 571
- Disco Elysium 572

Further Adventures 574

- A brief history of MUDs, online RPGs and MMORPGs 576
- RPG Maker: Over 30 years of indie RPGs 588
- 1982–1987: The birth of the Japanese RPG 594
- Expanding the canon: The rich world of non-English RPGs 598
- French RPGs: An early explosion of creativity 600
- Chinese RPGs: A treasure long overlooked 604
- Korean RPGs: The short-lived 'package' market 614
- Fan-Translations 624
- Games we'll (likely) never play 634

Lists & Further Reading 642

- Computer Gaming World's reader polls 644
- Editor's picks 648
- Further reading 652
- Glossary 656
- References 658
- Game index & cover gallery 666

Introduction

When thinking about where a book dedicated to computer RPGs might come from, one might consider Germany, Canada, the UK or the US. Maybe France, Russia or Poland. Surely never Brazil. There's a good reason for this.

When the first personal computers and games started to appear in the late '70s, Brazil was under a military dictatorship that banned all computer imports. We couldn't buy an Apple II, C64 or IBM PC, only the slow and crude national alternatives.

Some, like my father, managed to bypass this by smuggling a computer into the country. Still, to play you also needed to find games, and those were a rarity, especially CRPGs! You had to know someone who travelled to the US and could bring the floppy disks back – and then copy those. That's how *Betrayal at Krondor* arrived at my house back in the early '90s.

Even with the computer and the game in hand, there was still one final barrier: the language. As much as I enjoyed seeing my father play, I had no idea of what those costumed people were saying. I spent months playing *Krondor*, exploring its large world, but never even left the first chapter. My biggest achievement was brute-forcing a riddle chest.

I found solace in JRPGs. Not only they were much easier to play, but consoles were growing popular in Brazil. In 1994, we finally began to emerge from a long and brutal economic crisis. A friend in my apartment building had a Super Nintendo with *Chrono Trigger*, and that game became my passion. By then, owning a PC was finally legal, but the CRPG genre was dead – computers were *Doom* machines.

Years later, I was reading a games magazine and something caught my eye: a bizarre game in which you could teach farmers about crop rotation to earn XP – but only if you had created a smart character.

I had just started playing tabletop RPGs and was fascinated by a computer game like that. So, in 1998 I bought *Fallout*, which I love to this day. Not only is it a fantastic game that breathed new life into CRPGs, but I finally knew enough English to play it properly.

My younger brother didn't. He couldn't do most quests, so he just walked around and killed everyone. But that was also allowed, and we had a lot of fun talking about just how different our experiences were and all the cool things we kept discovering.

I wanted to do that with more people, to talk with my friends in school about this game, to hear their stories, to partake in the joy of a shared hobby. However, my parents had just divorced and I was then living in a small town in Brazil's countryside. My father gave me his old computer, but no one else I knew had one. They were still very expensive and complicated machines. Cyber Cafés began to appear around this time, but people played *Counter-Strike* there, not hundred-hour-long CRPGs.

Other than my brother, I had no one to talk to about the wise-cracking sword in *Baldur's Gate II*, how I became a vampire in *Morrowind* or the fact that you can shoot Anna Navarre in *Deus Ex*.

In 2004 I moved back to São Paulo, Brazil's biggest city, to go to university. A side-effect was that, for the first time in my life, I had the internet in my house. That was when everything changed.

It sounds obvious today – we take it for granted – but the Internet freed us from all regional barriers. I could talk to anyone, anywhere, about anything!

Eventually, I found the RPG Codex, where not only could I talk for hours about my favourite games, but also learn about RPGs I missed, alternate quest solutions I never tried, cool mods, funny stories, powerful builds and much more. I was home.

In the 14 years since, I've been trying to learn as much as possible about this amazing genre. I played *Ultima, Wizardry* and other classics that I had missed, tried obscure gems, emulated the hardware I never had, and much more. I owe a lot to abandonware sites, emulator developers, wise forum members and the great work done recently by GOG.com.

But where does one start? Just what is a C64? Does *Wizardry I* still hold up today? Is *Albion* good? Should I play the *Might and Magic* games in order? Am I playing badly, or is this game extremely hard? Which mods to use in *Neverwinter Nights*?

I really needed answers to all these questions – and many more – but finding them wasn't always easy.

Over the years, many guides became outdated, and when asking around you might find someone who "is tired of dumb questions", who gives poor answers or who simply hates a game that you might love. Resources such as "Top 10 RPGs" lists help, but they mostly focus on the recent, popular titles.

As such, this book represents several things.

First, it's a guide – the one I wish I'd had when I first began exploring the world of CRPGs. It shows the most important, popular and interesting titles, then tells you about what makes them so special. You can flip the book open, read about a few cool games, see the screenshots and choose what to play next.

I've made sure to add some historical context too, showing what was happening at the time. To fully grasp the impact *Ultima IV* or *Dungeon Master* had, you must know what came before and after them.

The book is also a helping hand. It has tips on how to run games that aren't compatible with modern hardware, tells you when there's a patch to fix critical bugs and even recommends some mods, so that you can have the best possible experience.

Finally, it's a gift to my younger self – and to anyone who might feel lonely, like I did. Here you have over a hundred people from across the world, all willing to sit down and tell you about their favourite RPGs, the great adventures that they had and why you should try these games.

Creating this book was a long, wild ride. It first began in early 2014, with the RPG Codex Top 70 CRPGs, a poll in which people voted on their favourite games and then wrote small reviews. From there came the idea of making an expanded book version, with longer reviews, adding historically important titles and curiosities. Having made the Top 70 list in about two months, I thought that the book would take around six to ten months, at most. Ha!

It took me four years.

Still, I can't complain. I learned a lot during this time, had a blast playing the 300+ games featured here, got in contact with legendary figures from my childhood such as Chris Avellone, Warren Spector, Scorpia and Tim Cain, as well as all the wonderful people that helped create and promote this project.

It's surreal now to recall a time when computers were rare, obscure artefacts and reading a simple quest in English was a challenge. A time when a project like this would've been impossible. I had no conversation with any foreigner until I was 17 years old, yet now I live in Japan.

Isaac Asimov used to say that the role of science fiction was to predict change, so that we could better handle it as a society. Perhaps the role of RPGs (and games in general) is to help prepare individuals for challenges and adventures to come.

Felipe Pepe, 2018
Project Editor

The goal of this Expanded Edition

The first complete release of The CRPG Book was published in February 2018, featuring around 400 RPGs from 1975 to 2016. During the rest of 2018, SteamSpy estimates that about 404 new RPGs were released on Steam. In 2019 that number was 562, in 2020 we got 675, and so on.

The Expanded Edition, too, will be outdated by the time you are reading this. There will be hundreds of new games, new DLCs, patches and must-play mods, maybe even a remake of an old classic. And that is OK – this project was never about reviewing the latest games.

Moreover, this update wasn't made just to add recent games. We cannot possibly fit every one of them in, and still lack the necessary distance and hindsight to historically analyse recent games like *Cyberpunk 2077*. The goal here is to correct flaws in the first edition: the mistakes, the missing titles and, above all, its blind spots.

This project began with a bunch of hardcore fans at the RPG Codex making a "Top RPGs of all time" list. Over time we've expanded it to include games of historical importance and interesting oddities, but the hardcore bias remained. It is ingrained in the very canon of video game history, in the core titles that the industry considers important and worth discussing.

Some readers might frown at us for including Flash games like *Swords and Sandals* (2006), but should we ignore an RPG that was played online over 350 million times, reaching a wider audience than most videogames? This industry has a nasty habit of sidelining outsiders when retelling its history – as if it is ashamed that *Neopets* was far more popular than any *Halo*.

In fact, the gap between what people play and the image that the industry projects has only been widening. As mobile gaming grew exponentially, especially in the global south, the so-called "core" industry circled wagons and created a media bubble.

CrossFire, Honor of Kings, FreeFire and some *Roblox* games reach a hundred million daily players each – more than most consoles sell during their entire lifetime – and yet are absent from mainstream games media like IGN, Gamespot, Eurogamer, Polygon and Kotaku.

They have their reasons, but this faulty reporting distorts the public perception of what videogames are – most "hardcore gamers" have absolutely no idea about which games are actually popular right now. Of course, people should play whatever they want, but historical analysis cannot fall into that same bias trap. Since these websites are mostly from the US, another big omission is games that aren't popular in the US – or were never even released in English.

China plays an ever-increasing role in the global videogame industry, and there's plenty of debate about policies like the console ban of 2014, but barely a word about the history of its massive internal game industry. Impressively, between mainland China, Taiwan and Hong Kong, over 200 PC RPGs were released in the '90s and 2000s, on a par with US and Japanese rates.

How can a book on RPG history not address that? How can *any* work on game history not mention that?

As such, the main goal of this Expanded Edition is precisely that – to expand the canon of video game history. Some of these games were added to the main review section, while specific scenes like the Korean, French and Chinese required contextualization, so a new section about them was added to the book.

Despite the error of reinforcing the industry's bias, we are really happy with the book's first edition – the PDF had over 160,000 downloads, while the physical version sold out and raised £22,845 for charity. We've received many messages saying that the book was a nostalgic trip. We hope this edition is also an eye-opening experience. Thank you so much for your support.

About the project

The CRPG Book Project is a collaborative, non-profit project created to compile the history of Computer Role-Playing Games into an accessible and educative volume. The book was written by volunteers from all continents – it's a chance to read a Polish player's thoughts on *The Witcher*, a Russian explanation of the impact of *Konung*, a Taiwanese player's memories of *Chinese Paladin*, and so on. It also includes people of all ages and from all walks of life: developers, journalists, modders, critics, scholars and fans, but also parents, couples, grandfathers, doctors, teachers, engineers, businessmen, and more.

The purpose of the project is to spread our passion for this great genre, sharing knowledge that is currently scattered across countless forums, magazines, websites and minds. The book covers CRPGs from 1975 to 2019, and offers several articles, mod recommendations, developer quotes and interesting trivia, in an effort to create a guide that will have something to offer to old-school veterans and new players alike. It contains over 1,800 screenshots, and we also created a game gallery with 22,000 .png screenshots of over 700 RPGs.

This Expanded Edition develops the original 2018 PDF release of the book, printed by Bitmap Books in 2019. The CRPG Book Project remains a non-profit project, and all the author earnings from the printed version (£22,845 as of April 2022) were donated to Vocação, a Brazilian NGO that helps kids and teenagers from poor areas to get a better education and find employment.

This Expanded Edition's author earnings will once again all be donated to Vocação. And we are happy to announce that a volunteer group will release a Chinese version of the book in 2023 – this version also donating profits to local charities.

This has been a fantastic journey; our deepest thanks to everyone who was part of it.

Dedicated to:
Claudia, Célia, Marco, Saphyra, Thais, Vanessa, Thiago, Carol, Katia, Andra, Mika, Sam and Mara.

Special thanks to:
Jonas Blum, Frank Lesniak, André du Plessis, Dániel "Houruck" Molnár, Zlotnikov Lesha, Christian, Patrizia and Leyla. The RPG Codex, RPG Watch, Bitmap Books, Hardcore Gaming 101, Ultima Codex, Matt Chat, The CRPG Addict, Cyber1, The Internet Archive, MobyGames, CGW Museum, DJ OldGames, DOSBox, Applewin, WinUAE, GOG, The Digital Antiquarian, Unseen64, Museum of Computer Adventure Game History, Old-Games.ru, Emuparadise, Abandonia, My Abandonware, LP Archive, Retromags, Overloadr, Shane Plays, They Create Worlds, Hall of Light, Nautilus, The Video Game History Foundation, Gaming Alexandria, Regras do Jogo, The Life & Times of Video Games, Luke Hillenaar, Aaron Swartz, Alexandra Elbakyan and every unsung hero who contributed to these websites, or developed emulators, ports for modern systems, mods and fan-patches, archived rare games or uploaded footage of them to YouTube. This book would have been impossible without all of you.

And, of course, a most special thankyou to those who created all these games in the first place, as well as those who put their best into games that unfortunately never saw the light of day. This book is a tribute to your work.

Contributors

ÁV - Árni Víkingur has been sheltered from the Icelandic frost by a warm computer since 1986 and therefore knows far too much about videogames.

AB - Alexander B

AGR - Andrew Gray is a vintage Apple Mac gaming defender, whether they be RPGs or incomprehensible HyperStacks made by 12-year-olds. He also enjoys eating apples.

AI - Andreas Inderwildi is a writer and freelance game critic and has an unhealthy obsession with *Dark Souls* and *Planescape: Torment*.

AM - Andrea Marcato is a long-standing Abandonian who is amazed to be in the same credits list as Chris Avellone.

AO - Alberto Ourique is an experienced copywriter, but a rookie in the game industry and novels. If it all goes wrong, he intends to embrace immortality by becoming a lich.

AR - Arkadiusz Makieła got his first computer, an Atari 65XE, at the age of 10. This was the beginning of his quest for an ultimate RPG. Today, he still doesn't realise there's no such thing.

ARZ - Arthur Zeferino plays pretty much every type of game, and sometimes makes them too.

AS - Andre Stenhouse didn't own a single console game until high school, but played *Quest for Glory* with her father and read stacks of books.

AT - April Tyack is a videogame researcher with a particular interest in player experience. She mostly prefers RPGs with a focus on narrative and strong character writing.

AY - Alpan Yıldırım feels he is pretty fortunate to be living in an era with so many good games to enjoy.

BA - Barış Gökçer Akbay used to write reviews for C64 games in his notebook as a kid for fun.

BC - BaronVonChateau dreams of making a surrealist RPG, though he has no idea of what he exactly means by that. To trump his despair, he spends years making convoluted quest mods named after jazz standards.

BE - Benjamin Sanderfer once helped develop software for a famous RPG publisher for their universal pen-and-paper game system. Too bad that system was such a failure it helped drive the company out of business. True story.

BES - Benjamin Schwartz

BF - Balázs Farkas is a Hungarian writer and gamer. He collects books and games compulsively, perhaps in the name of preservation.

BG - Brian 'Psychochild' Green is an MMO developer who first played text MUDs and is a lot friendlier than his pseudonym might indicate.

BL - Blobert started on RPGs with *Phantasie III* on the C64. Fell in love with *Ultima V*, and continues to play CRPGs when his four kids give him the chance.

BM - Branislav Mikulka resides in the land of the leprechauns. Got stuck in the MS-DOS gaming era, secretly admires trashy movies from the '50s and thinks Philip K. Dick was the best writer ever.

BS - Brian Stratton started playing CRPGs in third grade and still lives for fighting minotaurs, dragons, orcs and the undead.

BW - B. “Mr Novanova” White is a writer who remembers when *Knights of Legend* would make his floppy drive melt. Inquiries can be sent to forbwhite@gmail.com

CA - Christopher Ables has a passion for gaming history. He and his wife grew up gaming and love playing both new and old-school games together.

CAK - Captain Klang isn’t sure why there aren’t more Klingon-focused games, but he sighs and makes do. Big fan of indie games, the jankier, the better.

CB - Crooked Bee got to be the RPG Codex’s editor-in-chief after defeating the previous editor in a game of *Wizardry IV*. That should tell you all you need to know about her.

CC - Charles Clerc
www.olderbytes.com

CG - Casper “Grunker” Gronemann dislikes most parties, excepting those with six characters or more.

CH - Christian Hviid started gaming in the ’80s and still thinks 3D gaming is something new-school and dirty.

CHB - Chester Bolingbroke continues to struggle with his addiction.

CHR - Christian Hudspeth. Husband, father, gamer and really good at all of them, just ask his mom.

CR - Casiel Raegis is a North Carolina-based film director whose backlog is larger than this book.

CRS - Classics Revisited Show

D1 - Darktoes is a student, gamer and self-proclaimed helpful person.

DAE - Daemongar still fondly remembers completing *Ultima IV* back in the ’80s and becoming an 8-Part Avatar. Currently he only has an eighth or two left and questions if giving up the virtues was worth it.

DAR - Darth Canoli was drawn into the fray by *Shadowrun* PnP and *Might & Magic II*. TB & party-based tactical RPG addict since then.

DB - David Ballestrino can’t look at a chequered floor without imagining how to position a party and hoping for a good initiative roll.

DD - Daniel D’Agostino became a software developer to learn how to create games. Ironically, he now seldom finds time for games thanks to software development itself.

DF - Diggfinger loves *Fallout* and everything Troika-related. Check out his wiki on Jason D. Anderson if you’re not convinced.

DH - David “dhamster” Hamilton is ready to form a party like it’s 1999.

DiD - DiceysDelves really likes tabletop games idk

DK - David Konkol is an author and game designer whose insane ramblings can be found at www.madoverlordstudios.com.

DM - Drew Merrithew became a developer specialising in cybersecurity when it became apparent that game development doesn’t pay.

DO - Dorateen rolled a dwarven fighter over thirty years ago and has enjoyed this hobby from tabletop into its computer role-playing iterations ever since.

DR - Darth Roxor likes *Betrayal at Krondor,* naked volleyball and putting as many adverbs into his articles as possible.

DT - Deuce Traveler has many hobbies besides CRPGs. He also likes beer, exercise, pulp novels, chess and the occasional screw.

DU - Durante role-plays a scientist by day and is an RPG gamer at night. He has a thing for intricate systems and simulations, even if they are needlessly complex.

DW - David Walgrave has three uses for his deep, booming voice: to organise video game projects, to sing as the frontman of a metal band, and to quietly talk to his cute, fluffy dogs.

EJ - Ethan Johnson

ER - ERYFKRAD. His Holiness the God-Emperor of All Mankind, Lord of the Heavens above and Master of the Hells Below.

ES - Eric Shumaker is a gamer bad-boy who games for what he believes in. He has worked on many stupid games you haven’t played.

FAX - Fairfax is an MCA disciple and *Civilization* modder, loves game development stories and daydreaming about making CRPGs.

FE - Felipe Pepe made a 680-page book on Computer RPGs but his most-played game is *Dynasty Warriors 4*.

FHG - Ferhergón used to host "Maniacos del Calabozo" and thinks the old, gold times for RPGs are long gone.

GA - Garfunkel got a C64 for Christmas, and detoured briefly to Amiga 500 before settling in with a PC in the '90s and never straying elsewhere.

GB - Gary Butterfield is an author, podcaster and loving supporter of maligned CRPG sequels. He's actually sort of OK with THAC0.

GD - Ghostdog has been in RPG Codex far too long for his sanity's sake. When he had trouble replaying his favourite game, *Planescape: Torment* in widescreen resolutions, he made a UI mod to fix that.

GE - Geo Ashton is an avid writer who enjoys playing videogames and reading about gaming culture.

GS - Guilherme De Sousa has enjoyed CRPGs since playing *Ultima IV* on the C64 back in the mid-'80s.

GT - Grant Torre lives in the state of Michigan and spends his time on drumming, literature, videogames and everything else geek culture has to offer.

GW - George Weidman makes videos a few people enjoy. He has lost years of his life to the *Fallout* series, and regrets nothing.

GZ - Gustavo Zambonin is, perhaps, the youngest among all of the contributors, slowly learning how to savour the best CRPGs released since he was born.

H&JW - Hannah and Joe Williams are a married couple LARPing as computer game creators and part-time hermits.

HB - Haba, Harbinger of Decline

HX - Frank "HiddenX" Wecke is the Elder Spy, Game Curator & Editor at RPG Watch, RPG Dot veteran and special emissary at the RPG Codex.

IF - Ian Frazier is a game designer whose hobbies include painting minis and banishing unfathomable evils to the outer darkness.

IM - Ivan Mitrović is a proud member of the PC master race. In 2001 he tried his first RPG, *Planescape: Torment*, which to this day remains his favourite game.

IZ - Théo "Izual" Dezalay wrote a whole book about *Fallout*, which means he obviously made all the wrong choices in his life.

JA - Jaedar had a great big think about it, and realised *NWN2* is one of the first 'real' RPGs he ever played. He's been playing catch-up ever since.

JB - Jay Barnson is a writer, game developer, programmer and – in an alternate universe where the C64 never came to be – the Grand Emperor of the Western Hemisphere Hegemony.

JBH - James "Blaine" Henderson doesn't like whatever terrible games you like, unless they're games that he also happens to like; but he can probably find a reason to criticise you anyway.

JC - Gabor "J_C" Domjan grew up in the '90s and got to see the golden age of gaming. He enjoys most genres, but CRPGs and flight simulators are his real love.

JDN - Jordyn probably won't kick her *Space Station 13* obsession for a long time. Always goes for the mechanic role in any game, and IRL.

JG - Jörn Grote had to decide whether to study for final school examinations or play *Fallout*. It worked out for the best.

JH - John Harris writes for @ Play and on retro games, and also sometimes makes computer games. He thinks the best game ever made is *Rampart*, the fool.

JM - James McDermott is a musician who plays too many games. He is still waiting patiently for *Arcanum 2*.

JMR - Jedi Master Radek is, from the depth of his basement, scheming to take over the world, hoping to turn all readers into his mindless puppets.

JO - Joseph Coppola is a programmer who enjoys RPGs, novels, and other word-based activities.

JOL - Johnny Liu hasn't stopped gaming since he was a kid. He loves learning about and sharing cultural influences in games.

JRA - J. Rex Antrim writes everything from horror stories to b-movie reviews and is working on a fantasy novel. He started playing RPGs on NES and quit around the time all the protagonists got amnesia.

JR - Jack "Highwang" Ragasa is a YouTube game reviewer who attributes his overly verbose nature to his many years of video gaming.

JW - Jakub Wichnowski values story the most in games, and he hopes that one day he'll be able to make a game at least half as good as *Planescape: Torment*.

JU - James Ulwick

JY - Jeff Yeutter owes all of his success in life to his Atari ST and provides weekly sermons at the *Temple of Apshai*.

KE - Kenneth Kully inadvertently created the biggest hub of *Ultima* news and fan activity online, and still finds time for it when he isn't on call as a father or Scout leader!

KK - Kurt Kalata took his first step towards war and made the end of battle. He also runs Hardcore Gaming 101.

LAC - Lacrymas has been PC gaming since he was 5 and still injects all kinds of RPGs and strategy games directly into the veins.

LB - Laurent Braud wandered into *NetHack*'s dungeon. He's never really got out since, always looking for any kind of emerging gameplay.

LEV - Lev likes RPGs and just wanted to appear in a book with Chris Avellone.

LL - Ludo Lense trades sanity for the ability to make overly long videos about games.

LM - Luis Magalhães. From doctor to marketer to writer, Luis keeps changing class in real life, but his favourite gaming genre is unchanged since the '90s. Hint: it's not FPSs.

LMM - Lucas Marcondes de Moura is a translator and literature enthusiast obsessed with RPGs, immersive sims and old-school FPS games.

LU - Lunamos, who once thought CRPG meant Chinese RPG, wants to introduce more Chinese RPGs from China to the world.

M2 - David "mindx2" B spends many a night perusing his collection of classic computer game boxes, pining away for that bygone era.

MA - Mandalore runs a YouTube channel that will review anything and everything. He was always terrible at the "describe yourself".

MAS - Max Silbiger is a developer who does translation hacks of old Japanese PC games. Sometimes, he even gets to play them, too!

MCA - Chris Avellone is reported to be friendly and non-toxic; his mother still doesn't understand what he does on a daily basis, but he loves her anyway.

MH - Mathias Haaf is an amateur writer from Germany and an avid collector and player of MS-DOS RPGs. Has a YouTube channel where he posts videos on his beloved hobby.

MHO - Marc Hofstee is called the weirdest *Ascaron*-fan of all time (quote M. Worsley). He also loves *Final Fantasy VII*, an Atari ST and his seven kids.

MI - Michael Mils learned to read and write on a French 8-bit computer and therefore grew both bitter and nostalgic.

MIS - Michel Sabbagh is a bug smasher by day and word wrangler by night who has a salmon fetish.

MM - Maciej Miszczyk, a gamer since early childhood, loves games of all kinds but prefers either RPGs from the mid-to-late '90s or anything that's obscure, complex, difficult or unique.

MS - M Simard prefers to stay in the basement during the summer, although his German Shepherd does take him out for a walk every once in a while.

MUT - Murilo Trigo owes his sister Jessica a dedication in a book. Here it is.

MV - Marko Vučković is an old strategy fan who spent way too much time playing *Laser Squad* on his C64, but regrets nothing.

NA - Nikolis "Zaratoth" Asimakis has been a passionate RPG gamer from a young age. You can find him praising indie games at Indie Game Picks' blog.

NH - Nicolas Hennemann is a freelance writer and translator who took the chance to tell you about his favourite game and ran with it.

NJ - Nostaljaded can be found lurking in the Bearpit. No other known facts except a quirky one who prefers the veil over limelight.

NS - Nicole "Jaz" Schuhmacher grew up with *Pong* and is still a multi-platform gamer. She gets all teary-eyed when thinking of the games of the '90s.

NT - Neanderthal. Wounded, old and lecherous.

NY - Nyaa is an avid gamer who took up Translation LP of unique foreign games as a hobby to contribute back to the gaming industry that he loved.

OC - Octavius a.k.a. PetrusOctavianus is one of the veterans of the RPG Codex.

OU - Outmind enjoys long walks on the battlefield and hopes robots won't take over before an *FF Tactics* sequel is released.

PB - Pedro Bodini plays some stuff, sometimes even likes it.

PE - Petr Hanák is a *Dračí Doupě* game master who just had to create his own game system for the party. Secretly hoping to finish it and shatter the *AD&D* supremacy.

PFM - Patrick "TehSnakerer" Fisher-Murphy has been deep fried in jank; he talks about it on Youtube for far too long.

PJ - Prime Junta has a thing for systems, worlds and stories, and thinks RPGs on computers and off them are the coolest way we know to bring all of them together.

PMW - Pascal Marc Wagner is a linguist researching games. He is in love with Japanese games, bizarre murder mysteries and videogame vinyls.

PNH - Patrick Holleman writes books about the historical development of videogame design. No, he does not know why, either. www.thegamedesignforum.com

PS - Peter Salnikov is a videogame explorer and media producer from Russia, also the co-host of The House of The Dev podcast with Raphael Colantonio (*Dishonored*, *Prey*, *Weird West*). He also founded game dev studio Book Burner Games in 2021, working on its debut CRPG.

QX - Andrew "Quarex" Huntleigh is a family man with a PhD, and spends his days as a federal officer when not agonising over proper paper-doll inventory management.

RB - Robert Bailey is an RPG Watch member who still plays C64 RPGs and goes misty-eyed upon reflecting on the games that set him on this grand adventure.

RC - Richard Cobbett just wants everyone to stop with the bloody giant spiders already. Unless there's an equally giant can of RAID.

RE - Reggie Carolipio has been trying not to walk and turn in 90° angles or (A)ttack stray monsters without armour since the '80s.

RED - Red Hexapus is an avid CRPG fan and tabletop gamer, who enjoys smoking good cigars while watching bad movies.

RI - Ricardo Regis learned to love CRPGs as a child, while he fantasised everything that happened during tabletop RPG matches with his friends.

RJS - Ryan J. Scott a.k.a. "Zombra" is neither zombie nor zebra, but enjoys certain qualities of both.

RK - Rogueknight333 had a hard time finding the old-school RPGs he loved, so decided to use the *Neverwinter Nights* toolset to make his own, resulting in the ongoing *Swordflight* series.

RM - Richard Mitchell got his CRPG start with *Ultima* on the C64 in 1988. He would like to say it's been all downhill ever since but *Star Wars* and comic books would disagree.

RON - Robert Naaman prefers turn-based RPGs, but doesn't mind playing other types of game in the genre.

RP - Rob Parker studies interactive fiction and Roguelikes; Managing Editor for First Person Scholar.

RR - Ryan Ridlen has been hooked on RPGs since *Betrayal at Krondor*. Loves story-driven games and turn-based tactical combat.

RT - Rob Taylor has been hanging out in Waterdeep tavern, enjoying the vibe, since 1991. He was a professional games journalist in another life.

RTR - Rod "TronFAQ" Rehn has a dumb nickname that he's now stuck with, and somehow went from writing FAQs to making mods for one of his favourite games.

SA - Sitra Achara has been spelunking in *Temple of Elemental Evil* files since 2006, but has yet to be eaten by a grue.

SC - Scorpia is still crazy (gaming) after all these years. Sometimes, she wishes we were still in the 8-bit era.

SD - SniperHF started playing RPGs on completely opposite ends of the spectrum with *Fallout* and *Diablo.* He has been addicted to the genre ever since.

SG - Silver Girl

SH - Shanga@Bearpit is a cuddly fierce bear who doesn't like to share his food, but would gladly starve and let you eat it all if you're a nice person.

SGM - ShaggyMoose has been lost in the crypt since *Dungeon Master* and has a penchant for open-world exploration.

SN - Suzie Ng has been an RPG enthusiast since *Baldur's Gate II*, enjoys party-based games with good NPC interactions, and dreams of getting involved in mod development.

SP - Shane Stacks was surprised to find himself still alive after his head exploded the first time he laid eyes on *Pool of Radiance* on a C64. He still prefers turn-based combat. If you want to find his geeky nonsense and podcast episodes, visit Shane Plays.

SR - Scrooge got into computer gaming relatively late, being a part of the console crowd before. Since then she's loved soaking up everything that's turn- and party-based.

SS - Oleg "Smiling Spectre" Bobryshev is an avid gamer and game collector. He wants to play them all, but real life makes its own adjustments.

STS - Stew Shearer still needs to finish *Baldur's Gate*. Someday … Someday …

SU - SuicideBunny was due to help with the book, but the universe had other plans. RIP, bro.

SY - Shamus Young is a programmer, an author and nearly a composer. He just won't shut up about videogames.

TAB - Tonya Bezpalko loves stats that turn out to do nothing when you look them up later, and other antique design elements.

TC - Tim Cain has been making videogames since before it was cool. You know, like in the '80s.

TF - Thiago Fernandes dos Santos has always loved RPGs and fighting games.

TGT - Terry Game Tipz

TH - Thomas Henshell always reads the manual before playing the game. Always. Patiently awaiting the day manuals make a comeback.

TI - Tilman Hakenberg has managed to trick everyone into thinking he's some kind of writer, but doesn't really know what he's doing.

TM - Trevor "Trooth" Mooth is a self-proclaimed authority on Roguelikes, and has been gaming and writing since before you were born.

TR - Thomas Ribault can't stop talking with his hands. He loves CRPGs so much that he is writing a PhD about them.

TW - 'Tatty' Waniand would spend her perfect Sunday coding, reading books that aren't related to work, and daydreaming about gore and games.

VD - Vince D. Weller, indie dev proudly serving 0.003% of the Global Gaming Market since 2015.

VK - Vadim Keilin is a scholar whose academic job gives him the perfect excuse to play games – because, you know, research.

VL - Vladimir Sumina grew up playing adventure games. Then he discovered CRPGs, which showered him with an abundance of choices, and he soon realised that blowing up a door can be just as much fun as unlocking it.

VR - Vinicius Reis is a huge nerd and he is running against time, playing all the games he could not afford during his teenage years.

VS - VioletShadow would like to be a figure skater in the next life. In this one, she frequents questionable forums and plays *Bloodlines.*

WM - Wojtek "Mico Selva" Misiurka is a failed fan-fiction writer turned world-class time waster, with an ever-growing backlog of stuff to do.

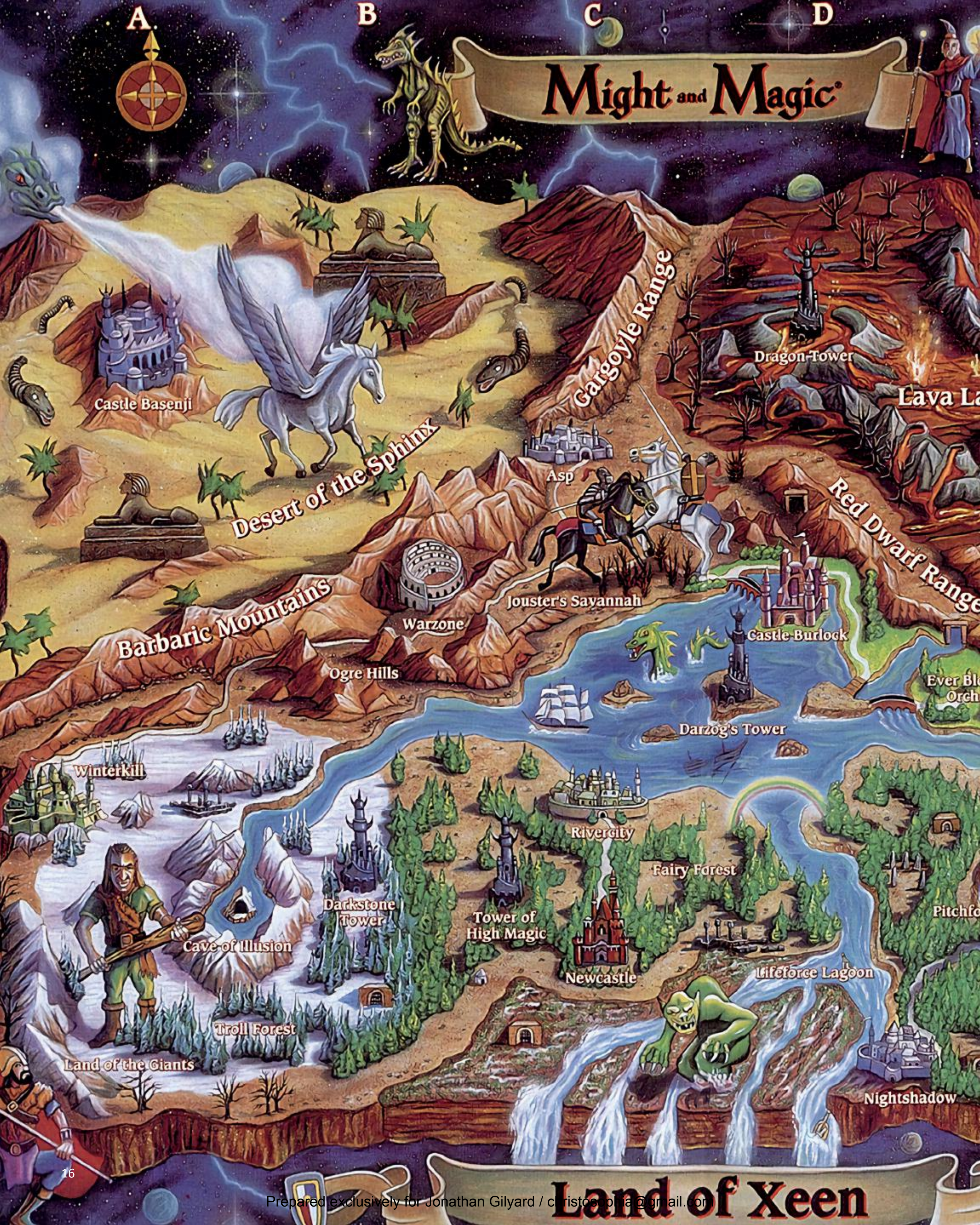
WS - Werner Spahl is an analytical chemist who never would have thought that fixing a game is sometimes more fun than playing it.

ZD - Zed Duke of Banville has been playing CRPGs since 1986. Although he now reluctantly plays games on IBM PCs and consoles, he spends his spare time building a time machine so that he can travel back and establish Amiga world domination.

ZE - Zed is wondering where all the puzzles in RPGs disappeared to? He'd like to go there and live out the rest of his days.

ZT - Zach Trimble

ZZ - Romanus "ZZ" Surt played shooter games before stumbling upon *Akalabeth* and *Mordor*.


A
B
C
D
Might and Magic®
Castle Basenji
Desert of the Sphinx
Gargoyle Range
Dragon Tower
Lava La
Asp
Red Dwarf Range
Barbaric Mountains
Warzone
Jouster's Sayannah
Castle Burlock
Ogre Hills
Ever Bl
Orch
Darzog's Tower
Winterkill
Rivercity
Fairy Forest
Darkstone Tower
Tower of High Magic
Cave of Illusion
Pitchfo
Newcastle
Lifeforce Lagoon
Troll Forest
Land of the Giants
Nightshadow
Land of Xeen

E
F
Dragon Lair
ake
Mount Firestone
Red River Basin
ossom
ard
Vertigo
Magic Delta
rk Creek
Witch Tower
Forest of the
Walking Dead
Toad Meadow
M. WINTERBAUER

Articles & Guides

Here we feature a guide to using this book and an FAQ on how to play older CRPGs, followed by a selection of articles about older hardware, game history and CRPG trends.

Several writers contributed here. The first article is from Jay Barnson, developer at Rampant Games and prolific writer, full of insights into the RPG genre.

The second comes from Michael Abbott, a game design professor and former host of the Brainy Gamer blog/podcast. He writes on his experiences teaching about older games to new generations.

Next we have Scorpia, the anonymous legend of gaming journalism. She was the CRPG expert for the Computer Gaming World magazine during the ’80s and most of the ’90s. Until 2009, she posted at Scorpia’s Gaming Lair, but has unfortunately retired. Still, she was kind enough to contribute an article and a couple of reviews for this book.

Finally, Craig Stern, creator of the *Telepath* RPG series and the *Messiah* board game, wrote an article on the distant origins of RPGs.

The world map for *Might and Magic IV: Clouds of Xeen* (1992), by artist Michael Winterbauer

Using this book

The goal of this book is not only to gather, preserve and share the history of CRPGs, but also to help people find hidden gems or experience classic titles for the first time. The games are listed in chronological order, starting in 1975, but feel free to start right at the end and slowly come back if you wish, or jump to your favourite title and explore what else was going on at the time.

The book contains over 400 CRPGs – some of them legendary classics, others just curiosities – but even the worst game included here has something interesting to offer, be it a great concept that was poorly executed or just some insight into the reasons behind the game's shortcomings.

If you're new to the genre or haven't played many older RPGs, here are some tips to help you:

SAVE OFTEN!! Auto-saves and checkpoints weren't common until the 2000s, so remember to save often or you might suddenly lose hours of progress. There's no shame in saving after every battle – ignore those who say "save-scumming ruins the challenge", as really challenging games will limit your saves when needed.

Start slowly. Games like *Wizardry I*, *Ultima IV* and *Pool of Radiance* are all-time classics, but going from modern games to one from the '80s is a shock – interfaces are terrible, there's zero hand-holding and you're expected to take notes and draw maps. Starting with them might frustrate you.

Dungeon crawlers are great for beginners. Games like *Eye of the Beholder, Lands of Lore, Anvil of Dawn* and *Dungeon Master* were designed to be accessible and have aged very well – they have mouse support and a well-done difficulty curve to ease in new players.

Suggested starting points:

– '80s CRPGs: *Dungeon Master, Quest for Glory, Phantasie* and *Wasteland*

– '90s CRPGs: *Might and Magic VI*, *Baldur's Gate*, *Fallout*, *Betrayal at Krondor, Star Control II, Diablo,* and *System Shock 2*

– 2000s CRPGs: *Deus Ex, Morrowind*, *Wizardry 8*, *Diablo II*, *Gothic*, *Geneforge*, *Dragon Age: Origins*, *Valkyria Chronicles* and *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic II - The Sith Lords*

– 2010s CRPGs: *Skyrim, Slay the Spire, Undertale, Dragon Quest XI, Fallout: New Vegas, The Witcher 3* and *Hand of Fate*

– Roguelikes: *Dungeons of Dredmor, Tales of Maj'Eyal* or *Stone Soup: Dungeon Crawl*

Above all, remember to have fun. Some games may take a while to get going, but continuously forcing yourself to play something you're not enjoying will only result in burnout.

FAQs

DOS, Apple, C64, Amiga ... Which version should I play?

The MS-DOS versions are usually the most common; they are often available on GOG.com and have a powerful and easy-to-use emulator: DOSBox.

The Commodore Amiga versions of some games released between 1985 and 1990 had much superior graphics and sound, but getting the Amiga emulators like FS-UAE to run can be slightly more complex.

For titles released before 1985, the Apple II versions are usually the best alternative, as the AppleWin emulator is extremely easy to use.

What should I keep to hand while playing?

It's strongly advised to play pre-2000s RPGs with pencil and paper handy for note-taking and map-making. The manual is important for checking rules, but some RPGs also use it as a spellbook, requiring you to type the name of each spell when casting.

Also, most '80s RPGs had a Quick Reference Guide, with all the game's commands in one handy list. They are extremely useful and I suggest printing it.

Should I read the manual before playing?

That's expected for most pre-'90s RPGs, as they provide little to no in-game tutorials and creating a character requires familiarity with the game's rules.

Moreover, games like *Ultima IV* have amazing manuals explaining the world and its lore, and that knowledge might be required during play.

Should I take notes?

Quest logs weren't common until the late '90s and older RPGs often have keywords, passwords or even entire magic rituals you need to know to beat the game – these might be mentioned just once during dialogue, so be sure to note them down!

Should I draw my own dungeon maps?

That's part of the intended experience in most old-school dungeon crawlers. Designers would add teleporters, spinners, dark areas and other traps to confuse players and challenge their map-making skills.

If you don't want to use a pencil and grid paper, there's great software such as Grid Cartographer. Some games also have their own fan-made mapping tools, such as *Eye of the Beholder*'s The All-Seeing Eye.

Should I re-roll my character's stats?

In games such as *Wizardry*, stats determine which classes your characters can choose. For example, to become a Thief it's necessary to have at least 11 Agility, so you'll have to re-roll until you get that.

Others, like *Baldur's Gate,* allow you to pick a class regardless, but a poor stat roll can leave you with a weak character. So, again, read the manual carefully.

I'm afraid my characters will suck. What can I do?

Indeed, creating a bad character in some older RPGs can make progress extremely difficult – sometimes impossible.

If you read the manual but still feel insecure, do an online search for recommended parties for beginners. You can copy them entirely or just take hints, and that will help you avoid hitting a wall hours later.

I can't get a game to work. What now?

Visit the PC Gaming Wiki, an amazing wiki that helps players run and optimise all kinds of PC games. If you can't find the game or the issue you're having, try checking the Vogons forums.

Blobber? RNG? MUD? What do these words mean?

Please check the glossary at the end of the book.

What is an Old-School RPG?

by Jay Barnson

I'm going to make a confession. This is a big one, coming from a designer of an "old-school style" CRPG, and from a guy who's constantly harping on about the joys of old-school gaming.

I don't know what the hell "old-school" means.

Sure, I was there playing these old classics when they were new, and I still play some of them today. (Hey, I just re-played *Ultima III* a few months ago!) I remember clearly when *The Bard's Tale* was the hot new thing. I was reading "behind the scenes" articles in magazines and books when the big players of the era seemed like they'd be pumping out RPGs until the end of time – yet are now long shuttered. I've chatted with some of these guys at length at GDC (back when it was called CGDC, even). But that doesn't mean I know what I'm talking about.

> I don't know what the hell "old-school" means.

Sure, I've got my own little pet ideas, but they apparently conflict with other people's ideas, so apparently I don't really understand what it means. That, or old-school is in the eye of the beholder.

Take, for example, turn-based vs. real-time. Action-based, "real-time" RPGs have been with us for a very, very long time. I like to refer back to *Gateway to Apshai*, published in 1983 (yeah, over a decade before *Diablo*), which was pure action-arcade-RPG. You had the trappings of an RPG, gathering loot and gaining levels as you used the joystick to do action-based battle against pixelated bad-guys.

We can also go back to *Ultima III* or *Telengard*, two of the earliest CRPGs I ever played. These were "real-time turn-based" if that makes any sense. You had time limits to choose your actions. Worse, the only "pause" command was getting into some input loop where the games were asking for additional details or confirmation of your action.

So really, as far as I'm concerned, and as much as I like to refer to "turn-based" games as "old-school", the truth of the matter is that both have been with us about as long as we've had commercial CRPGs.

There's absolutely nothing inherently new or improved or better about action-based gaming. And there were absolutely no technical limitations preventing RPGs from being real-time/action-based – there were lots of action RPGs back then.

Variety runs the gamut. Perspective? We had top-down, first-person, isometric, side-scrolling, hybrids and variations like crazy. Even games that changed perspective when combat started.

Complexity? You've got dirt-simple titles from back in the day that make the most "dumbed-down" modern offerings seem like piloting the space shuttle by comparison.

And then you have some pretty awesomely over-the-top tactical stuff, like SSI's *Wizard's Crown*. And humongously detailed systems with tons of dynamically-generated content and gazillions of factions, like *Daggerfall*. And everything in-between. Old-school games had you exploring a single, open-ended dungeon. Or an open-ended world. Or led you along a very constrained path, level-by-level.

We can't even agree about a time period for "old-school". Maybe it's my age, but I still have a tough time thinking of any game published in a year that begins with a "2" as "old-school".

It's as if you take the history of commercial computer games, which for me begins around 1979, and mark it at the halfway point between then and now – which would be about 1996 – and set that as the "old-school" demarcation.

SCORE:001330
LEVEL:01
TIME:78
FIGHT
GOLDEN
GARTER
SCEPTRE
SNAKE

Gateway to Apshai: action-based battles back in 1983

(3)(1)
1
Alis G
FHP M:37 L:01
H:0150 F:9969
2
Odin G
MHB M:00 L:01
H:0150 F:0849
3
Myau G
MFC M:75 L:01
H:0121 F:9849
4
Lutz G
MEW M:75 L:01
H:0122 F:9949
---Conflict!!---
>Gargoyles
----Player 1----
Calm Wind

Ultima III imposed time limits on your decisions

A ALTER
C CHECK
E EXAM
M CAMP
N NEXT
W WAIT
? HELP
LORD MILES OF ESLAKE
VISIBILITY:GOOD

The awesomely over-the-top *Wizard's Crown*

Al-Qadim: The Genie's Curse, RPG or not? No one cared.

Yeah, I'll give it a little bit of extra slosh, but I have a tough time thinking of a game like *Oblivion* as old-school. Friggin' kids. Plus, as I'm still playing older games for the first time (I just recently finished *Star Wars: KotOR II)*, I have a tough time thinking of some of these games as being all that old.

When I talk "old-school", I tend to talk about classic games that I personally played, which included some classics as well as some stinkers. Back then, I didn't worry about whether *Al-Qadim: The Genie's Curse* was a "real" RPG or not. Hardly anybody worried about that until the "boom" of RPGs hit its peak in the early 90s and then started contracting.

Sure, you occasionally had an article explaining the difference between the two popular genres, RPG vs. adventure. How quaint that seems now. Really – it was all good. Except when it was bad. When did we start worrying so hard about what box we fit these games into, anyway? And how did that happen?

So you wanna know what "old-school" means? Maybe it means all the amazing variety of game styles that used to be sold but are no longer "in vogue" amongst mainstream publishers.

Instead, they've narrowed their scope down to just a tiny handful of crowd-pleasing styles that they keep trying to perfect. But as the whole "mainstream publishing" thing is also losing relevance (at least for PC development), I don't even understand how important that really is anymore.

I'm still going to refer to some of the things I do as "old-school," but like the word "indie", it's really just a poor shorthand offered to potential players to reset expectations. But old is the new new. Or something like that.

But really, I still don't know what the hell I'm talking about.

March 18, 2013

Jay Barnson has been playing video games since Pac-Man *and* Wizardry *were hot stuff, and has been creating both indie games and top-shelf "AAA" retail games for over a decade.*

Ports:
Far beyond resolution and FPS

by Felipe Pepe

Port comparisons in today's era of multi-platform releases usually amount to minor differences, such as slightly better visual effects, a slightly smoother frame rate or slightly higher resolution, especially when comparing Sony's and Microsoft's consoles. PC ports might have more nuances, such as 4K resolution, additional options like Field of View and support for mods.

Still, it's a far cry from the '80s, when dozens of wildly different platforms were fighting for consumer preference, each with its own hardware particularities. Even basic elements like colours or sound were up for grabs – a 1986 Macintosh had a sound card but could only render black and white images, while an IBM PC from the same year could display colours but the only sound it could produce was beeps from its internal speaker.

Even among computers with colour, there were wide ranges of colour palettes and limitations. The blues of a Commodore 64, an Amstrad CPC and an NES had completely different tones, often making art designed for one hardware look weird on the other.

Then you had deeper differences: some computers used cassette tapes, others 5¼-inch or 3½-inch floppies. Some had mouse support; others didn't even have a hard drive. Plus all the variations in speed and capacity of each hardware – tapes were extremely slow; merely loading a game could take 10 minutes.

Another factor was the time difference between ports. *Dungeon Master* was released for the Atari ST in 1987 and for the Amiga in 1988, and was only ported to MS-DOS in 1992. Some companies would update the ports as time went by, so the original 1985 release of *Phantasie* for the Commodore 64 had crude graphics and clunky UI, while the 1987 Amiga version used new, colourful art and had mouse support.

This style of game porting would continue until the early 2000s, when several factors such as the massive popularity of consoles, the economic struggles of PC developers, the market dominance of a few giant publishers and the arrival of the Xbox pushed all games towards multi-platform releases.

For players wondering what's the best version of an older game, the MS-DOS versions are usually the easiest to find and run – they are often available on GOG.com and have a powerful and easy-to-use emulator: DOSBox (the DOSBox Daum build offers more options, while DFend has a friendly interface).

The Commodore Amiga versions of some games released between 1985 and 1990 have much superior graphics and sound, but getting the WinUAE Amiga emulator to run can be slightly more complex. Your best option is using the more friendly FS-UAE release, or the Amiga Forever emulator – it's paid-for, but comes with pre-configured setups.

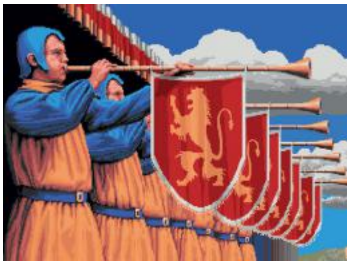
For titles released before 1985, the Apple II versions are usually the best alternative, as the AppleWin emulator is extremely easy to use, and you can also play online at Virtual Apple II.

The following pages will show some comparisons between several ports of the same game, to give you an idea of just how different they could be.

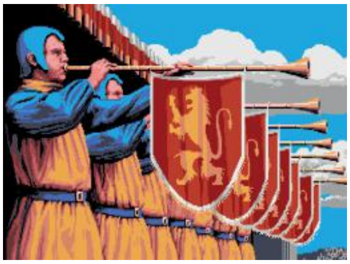
Important: Please note that the screenshots of older games (up until around the Windows 95 era) have had their aspect ratio corrected to show similarly to how they would have looked on a CRT monitor at the time. These monitors had 4:3 aspect ratios and would stretch the images vertically to fill the screen.

Games were designed with this stretching in mind, so an MS-DOS game will be distorted if you play it using a modern monitor in a 16:9 aspect ratio.

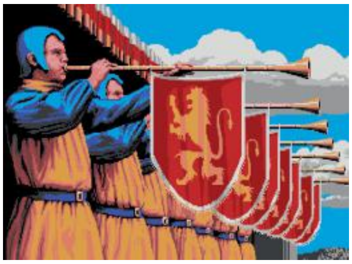
Defender of the Crown



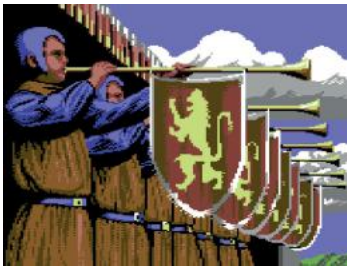
Commodore Amiga



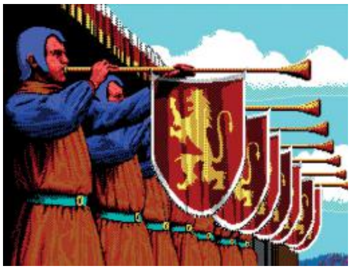
Apple IIGS



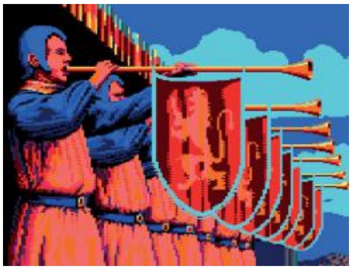
Atari ST



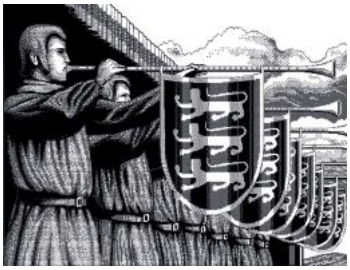
Commodore 64



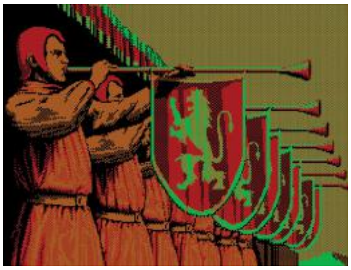
MS-DOS (EGA Mode)



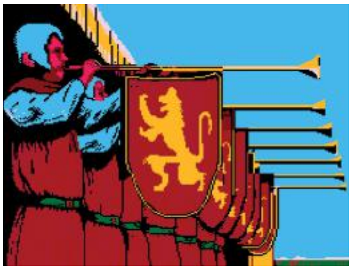
Amstrad CPC



Macintosh



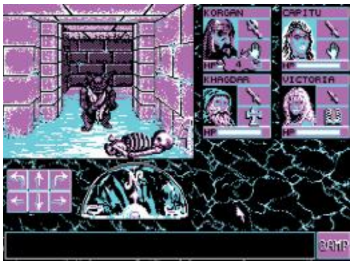
MS-DOS (CGA Mode)



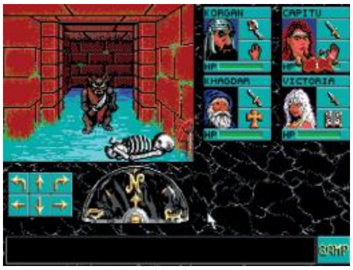
NES

Defender of the Crown (1987) was designed to show the Amiga's graphical power. While its 16-bit rivals – the Apple IIGS and the Atari ST – could display a very similar image, they still lost some of the finer details. The comparison also shows some peculiarities of each machine, such as the C64's darker colours.

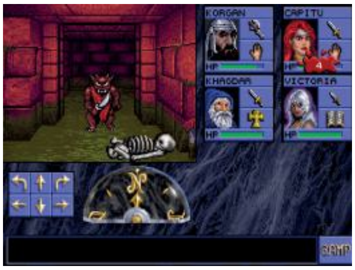
Eye of the Beholder


KORGAN
CAPITU
KHAGDAR
VICTORIA
CAMP

CGA (4 colours)


KORGAN
CAPITU
KHAGDAR
VICTORIA
CAMP

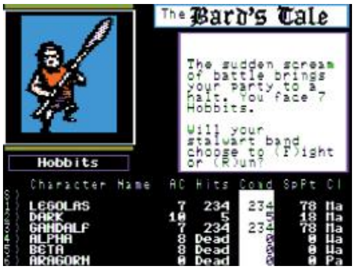
EGA (16 colours)


KORGAN
CAPITU
KHAGDAR
VICTORIA
CAMP

VGA (256 colours)

Even playing in the same platform could result in very different experiences. SSI's *Eye of the Beholder* (1991) was released for MS-DOS with gorgeous VGA graphics, but it also supported older graphics cards. While those playing GOG's re-release, or on emulators, today usually default to the superior VGA mode, back then, players with older machines had no choice but to play in EGA or even CGA mode.

The Bard's Tale

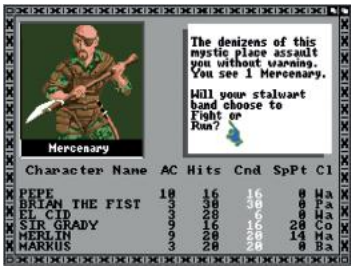

The Bard's Tale
Hobbits

The sudden scream of battle brings your party to a halt. You face 7 Hobbits.

Will your stalwart band choose to (F)ight or (R)un?

```
 Character Name   AC Hits Cond SpPt Cl
1) LEGOLAS         7  234  234  78 Ha
2) DARK           10    5    5  18 Ha
3) GANDALF         7  234  234  78 Ha
4) ALPHA           8 Dead    0   0 Ha
5) BETA            8 Dead    0   0 Ha
6) ARAGORN         0 Dead    0   0 Pa
```

Apple II (1985)

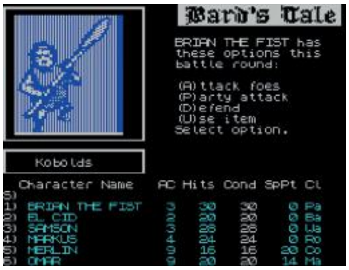


The denizens of this mystic place assault you without warning. You see 1 Mercenary.

Will your stalwart band choose to Fight or Run?

```
Character Name   AC Hits Cnd SpPt Cl
PEPE             10  16  16   0 Wa
BRIAN THE FIST    3  30  30   0 Pa
EL CID            3  28   6   0 Wa
SIR GRADY         9  16  16  20 Co
MERLIN            9  20  20  14 Ma
MARKUS            3  20  20   0 Ba
```

Commodore Amiga (1986)


Bard's Tale
Kobolds

BRIAN THE FIST has these options this battle round:

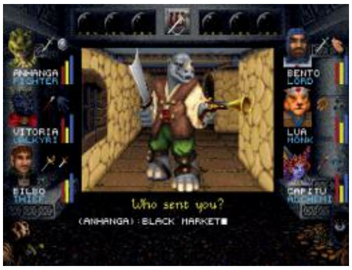
(A)ttack foes
(P)arty attack
(D)efend
(U)se item
Select option.

```
 Character Name   AC Hits Cond SpPt Cl
1) BRIAN THE FIST  3  30   30   0 Pa
2) EL CID          2  20   20   0 Ba
3) SAMSON          3  28   28   0 Wa
4) MARKUS          4  24   24   0 Ro
5) MERLIN          9  16   16  20 Co
6) OMAR            9  20   20  14 Ma
```

ZX Spectrum (1988)

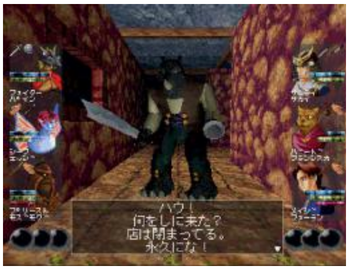
The original *Bard's Tale* for the Apple II was an impressive graphical feat since, until then, dungeon crawlers like *Wizardry* had all used wire-frame graphics. However, the Amiga version, released just a year later, added mouse support and constituted a massive leap in graphical quality, overshadowing previous versions. Still, the high cost of 16-bit computers meant ports for weaker but cheaper machines like the ZX Spectrum and Amstrad CPC would still be produced in the following years.

Wizardry VII: Crusaders of the Dark Savant

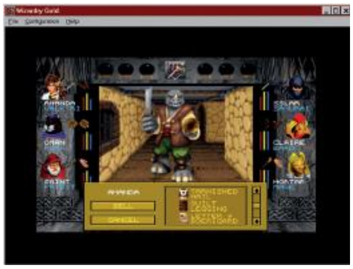

ANHANGA FIGHTER
VITORIA VALKYRIE
BILBO THIEF
BENTO LORD
LUA MONK
CAPITU ALCHEMIST

Who sent you?
(ANHANGA) : BLACK MARKET

MS-DOS (1992)

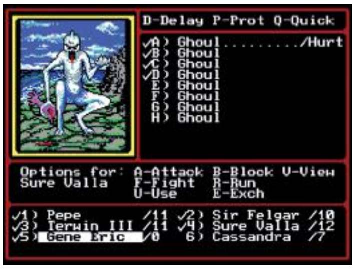

ハウ！
何をしに来た？
店は閉まってる。
永久にな！

PlayStation (1995)


Windows (1996)

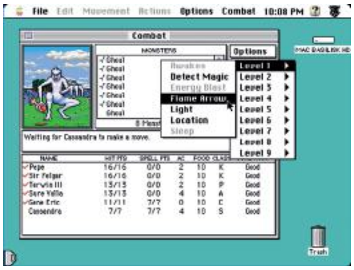
Not all re-releases and later ports are improvements. *Wizardry VII* received a Japan-only remake for the PlayStation, but the fully 3D graphics have aged much more poorly than the original's pixel art. Worst of all was *Wizardry Gold,* a re-release of the game for Windows and Mac that added many bugs and blurred pixels, and an inconsistent art style, and only ran in a window. In this case, just stick to the original release.

Might and Magic II: Gates to Another World



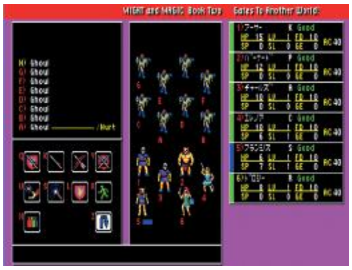
```
D-Delay P-Prot Q-Quick

✓A) Ghoul........../Hurt
✓B) Ghoul
✓C) Ghoul
✓D) Ghoul
 E) Ghoul
 F) Ghoul
 G) Ghoul
 H) Ghoul

Options for:  A-Attack B-Block V-View
Sure Valla    F-Fight  R-Run
              U-Use    E-Exch

✓1) Pepe       /11 ✓2) Sir Felgar /10
✓3) Terwin III /11 ✓4) Sure Valla /12
✓5) Gene Eric  /0   6) Cassandra  /7
```

MS-DOS (1988)


File
Edit
Movement
Actions
Options
Combat
10:08 PM
Combat
MONSTERS
Options
Detect Magic
Flame Arrow
Light
Location
Sleep
Level 1
Level 2
Level 3
Level 4
Level 5
Level 6
Level 7
Level 8
Level 9
Trash

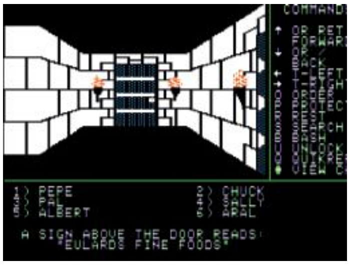
Waiting for Cassandra to make a move.

Macintosh (1990)


PC-98 (1988)

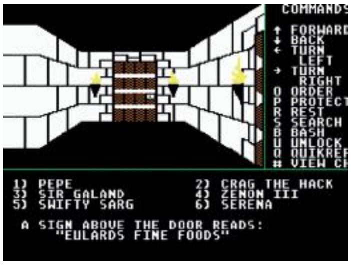
Combat in most versions of *Might and Magic II* is very similar, using keyboard controls and showing only one enemy at a time. The Mac version, however, is fully mouse-driven and uses the Mac's GUI to display multiple windows at a time. While this is slick, many players find that managing a party of six characters is much easier with the keyboard's hotkeys. The Japanese PC-98 port is also mouse-driven, but instead of multiple windows, it has an entirely different combat screen, which shows the party and the enemies.

Might and Magic I - Exploration Comparison


COMMANDS
↑ OR RET FORWARD
↓ OR / BACK
← T-LEFT
→ T-RIGHT
O ORDER
P PROTECT
R REST
S SEARCH
B BASH
U UNLOCK
Q QUIKREF
# VIEW CH

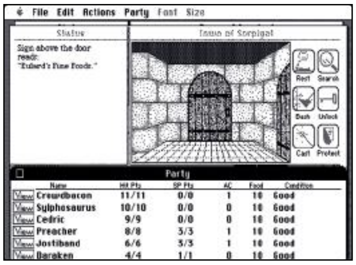
```
 1) PEPE                  2) CHUCK
 3) PAL                   4) SALLY
 5) ALBERT                6) ARAL

  A SIGN ABOVE THE DOOR READS:
       "EULARDS FINE FOODS"
```

Apple II original release (1986)


COMMANDS
↑ FORWARD
↓ BACK
← TURN LEFT
→ TURN RIGHT
O ORDER
P PROTECT
R REST
S SEARCH
B BASH
U UNLOCK
Q QUIKREF
# VIEW CH

```
1) PEPE                2) CRAG THE HACK
3) SIR GALAND          4) ZENON III
5) SWIFTY SARG         6) SERENA

 A SIGN ABOVE THE DOOR READS:
      "EULARDS FINE FOODS"
```

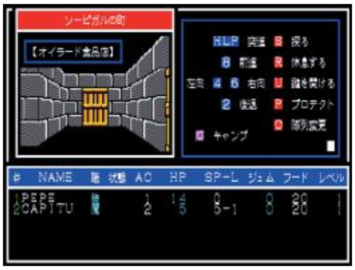
MS-DOS port (1987)


File
Edit
Actions
Party
Font
Size
Status
Town of Sorpigal
Rest
Search
Bash
Unlock
Cast
Protect
Party

Sign above the door reads:
"Eulard's Fine Foods."

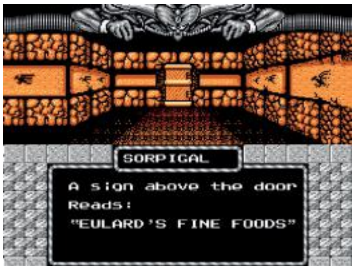
Name	Hit Pts	SP Pts	AC	Food	Condition
Crowdbacon	11/11	0/0	1	10	Good
Sylphosaurus	10/10	0/0	0	10	Good
Cedric	9/9	0/0	0	10	Good
Preacher	8/8	3/3	1	10	Good
Jostiband	6/6	3/3	1	10	Good
Daraken	4/4	1/1	0	10	Good

Macintosh port (1987)


ソーピガルの町
【オイラード食品店】
HLP 突撃
S 探る
8 前進
R 休息する
左向 4 6 右向
U 鍵を開ける
2 後退
P プロテクト
O 隊列変更
C キャンプ

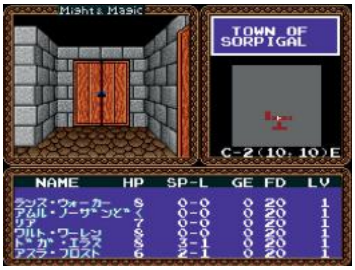
#	NAME	職	状態	AC	HP	SP-L	ジェム	フード	レベル
1	PEPE			1	14	0	0	20	1
2	CAPITU			2	5	5-1	0	20	1

PC-88 port (1987)



A sign above the door
Reads:
"EULARD'S FINE FOODS"

NES port (1990)

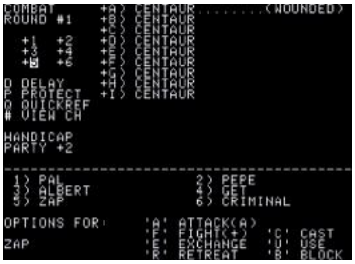

Might & Magic
TOWN OF SORPIGAL
C-2 (10, 10) E

NAME	HP	SP-L	GE	FD	LV
ランス・ウォーカー	8	0-0	0	20	1
アムル・ノーザンビ	[illegible]	0-0	0	20	1
リア	7	0-0	0	20	1
ワルト・ワーレン	8	0-0	0	20	1
ドガ・エラス	8	3-1	0	20	1
アスラ・フロスト	6	2-1	0	20	1

PC Engine remake (1991)

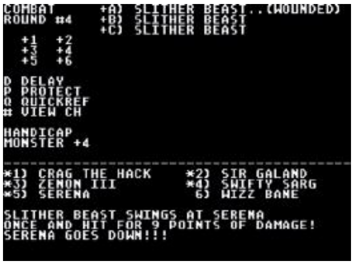
The PC Engine remake was ambitious, with character design by Yoshikazu Yasuhiko, a famous Japanese artist, and a soundtrack by Joe Hisaishi, known for its work on Studio Ghibli movies.

Might and Magic I - Combat Comparison



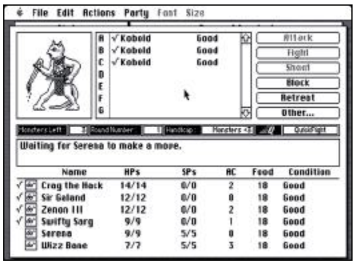
```
COMBAT     +A) CENTAUR........(WOUNDED)
ROUND #1   +B) CENTAUR
           +C) CENTAUR
  +1  +2   +D) CENTAUR
  +3  +4   +E) CENTAUR
  +5  +6   +F) CENTAUR
           +G) CENTAUR
D DELAY    +H) CENTAUR
P PROTECT  +I) CENTAUR
Q QUICKREF
# VIEW CH

HANDICAP
PARTY +2
----------------------------------------
 1) PAL                2) PEPE
 3) ALBERT             4) GET
 5) ZAP                6) CRIMINAL

OPTIONS FOR:    'A' ATTACK(A)
                'F' FIGHT(+)    'C' CAST
ZAP             'E' EXCHANGE    'U' USE
                'R' RETREAT     'B' BLOCK
```

Apple II original release (1986)



```
COMBAT     +A) SLITHER BEAST..(WOUNDED)
ROUND #4   +B) SLITHER BEAST
           +C) SLITHER BEAST
  +1  +2
  +3  +4
  +5  +6

D DELAY
P PROTECT
Q QUICKREF
# VIEW CH

HANDICAP
MONSTER +4
----------------------------------------
*1) CRAG THE HACK     *2) SIR GALAND
*3) ZENON III         *4) SWIFTY SARG
*5) SERENA             6) WIZZ BANE

SLITHER BEAST SWINGS AT SERENA
ONCE AND HIT FOR 9 POINTS OF DAMAGE!
SERENA GOES DOWN!!!
```

MS-DOS port (1987)

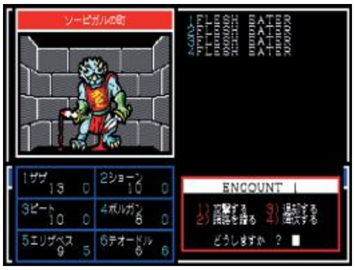

File
Edit
Actions
Party
Font
Size
Attack
Fight
Shoot
Block
Retreat
Other...
Monsters Left
Round Number
Handicap
Monsters +3
QuickFight

A ✓ Kobold Good
B ✓ Kobold Good
C ✓ Kobold Good
D
E
F
G

Waiting for Serena to make a move.

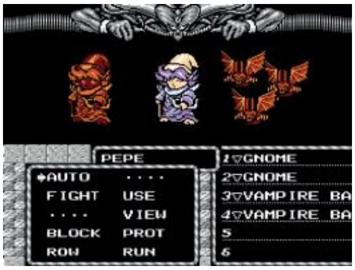
	Name	HPs	SPs	AC	Food	Condition
✓	Crag the Hack	14/14	0/0	2	18	Good
✓	Sir Galand	12/12	0/0	0	18	Good
✓	Zenon III	12/12	0/0	2	18	Good
✓	Swifty Sarg	9/9	0/0	1	18	Good
	Serena	9/9	5/5	0	18	Good
	Wizz Bane	7/7	5/5	3	18	Good

Macintosh port (1987)

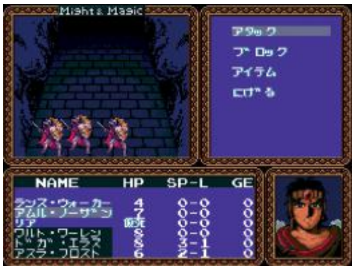

ソーピガルの町
1 FLESH EATER
2 FLESH EATER
3 FLESH EATER
4 FLESH EATER
1ザザ 13 0
2ショーン 10 0
3ピート 10 0
4ボルガン 8 0
5エリザベス 9 5
6テオードル 8 6
ENCOUNT

どうしますか ？

PC-88 port (1987)


PEPE
AUTO
····
FIGHT
USE
····
VIEW
BLOCK
PROT
ROW
RUN
1▽GNOME
2▽GNOME
3▽VAMPIRE BA
4▽VAMPIRE BA
5
6

NES port (1990)


Might & Magic
アタック
ブロック
アイテム
にげる

NAME	HP	SP-L	GE
ランス・ウォーカー	4	0-0	0
アムル・ノーザン	7	0-0	0
リア	[illegible]	0-0	0
ワルト・ワーレン	8	0-0	0
ドガ・エラス	8	3-1	0
アスラ・フロスト	6	2-1	0

PC Engine remake (1991)

Might and Magic I was first released on the Apple II. The DOS port arrived later, and it's very faithful, just changing some colours and fonts. The Mac port, however, makes full use of the machine's mouse support and high-resolution (albeit monochrome) graphics, introducing a vastly superior interface. The Japanese machines were much better at handling colours, so their versions have the best visuals among PC releases.

The NES port has some drastic changes – the interface is menu-based, a mini-map was added, and graphics are much better, making it arguably the best version available in English. Finally, the PC Engine version is actually a remake. Adapted to Japanese audiences, it features a cast of six fixed heroes and a fancy intro sequence, adds an on-screen mini-map and is fully voiced. Sadly, it was only released in Japan.

Unplayable

by Michael Abbott

One of my most satisfying moments as a teacher came two years ago when 15 students overcame their resistance and disorientation and embraced the original *Fallout*. I wrote about that experience, and since then I've continued to challenge my students with games that fall well outside their comfort zones: arcade classics (e.g. *Defender*); interactive fiction (e.g. *Planetfall*); and early dungeon crawlers (e.g. *Rogue*).

But I've noticed a general downward trajectory forming over the last six years or so. Gradually my students have grown less and less capable of handling one particular assignment: *Ultima IV***.**

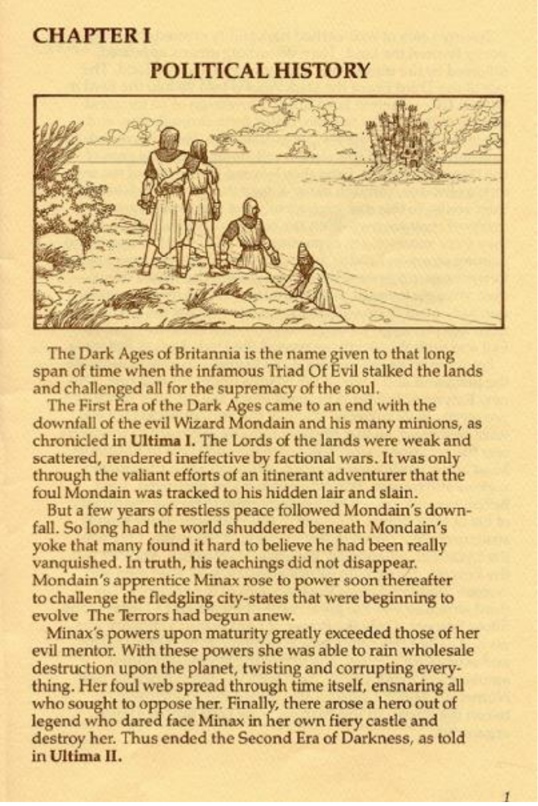
To be sure, they struggle with a game like *Planetfall*, but when they finally learn the game's syntax (and heed my advice to map their progress), it's mostly a question of puzzle-solving. *Defender* knocks them down initially, but they soon apply the quick reflexes they've developed playing modern games, and they're fine.

Ultima IV is another story. Here's a sampling of posts from the forum I set up to facilitate out-of-class discussion of the game:

> *"I've been very confused throughout the entire experience. I've honestly sat here for hours trying to figure out what to do and it just isn't making much sense to me right now."*
>
> *"When I start a game I like to do it all on my own, but it's been impossible to do so with* Ultima. *I've asked friends for help, looked up FAQs/walkthroughs, and even searched for Let's Play* Ultima 4 *on YouTube and I am still uncertain as to how to get further in this game."*
>
> *"Yeah, I still have no idea what the main goal is. I suppose it's to basically find out what the purpose of the Ankh is. But I see no way of furthering that goal."*
>
> *"I tried for a while without any walkthroughs to get the full gamer experience sort of thing and within the hour I gave up because of a combination of bad controls and a hard-to-get-into story, for me at least. It reminded me of a bad* RuneScape."
>
> *"I don't quite understand the concept of the game. I believe my main confusion is the controls and how it displays what you have done and how you moved. I'm not used to RPGs and I don't like them too much. I hope to find out how to move forward, but so far no luck."*
>
> *"How the hell do I get out of here after I die?"*

They had five days to play *U4*, and I asked them to make as much progress as they could in that time. When we gathered to debrief in class, a few students explained how they'd overcome some of their difficulties, but the vast majority was utterly flummoxed by the game. As one of them put it, "I'd say for gamers of our generation, an RPG like *Ultima IV* is boring and pretty much unplayable." After removing the arrow from my chest, I asked them to explain why.

It mostly came down to issues of user interface, navigation, combat and a general lack of clarity about what to do and how to do it. I had supplied them with the Book of Mystic Wisdom and the History of Britannia, both in PDF form, but not a single student bothered to read them. "I thought that was just stuff they put in the box with the game," said one student.



CHAPTER I

POLITICAL HISTORY

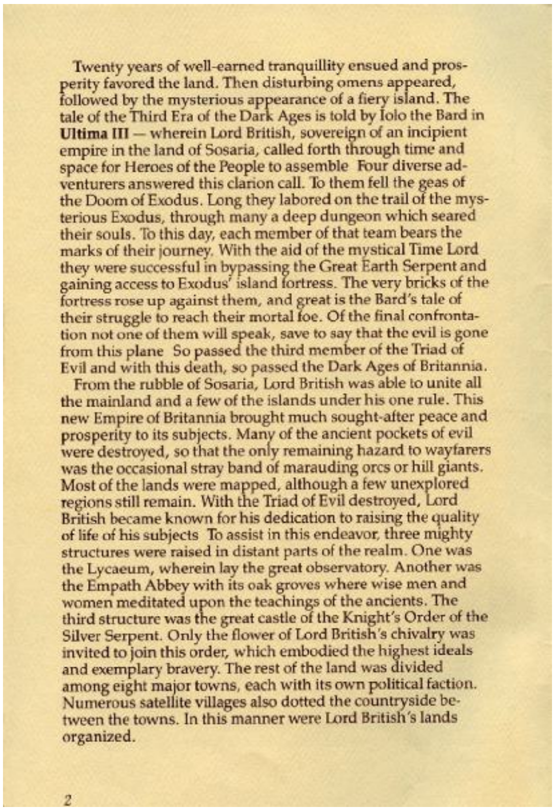
The Dark Ages of Britannia is the name given to that long span of time when the infamous Triad Of Evil stalked the lands and challenged all for the supremacy of the soul.

The First Era of the Dark Ages came to an end with the downfall of the evil Wizard Mondain and his many minions, as chronicled in **Ultima I.** The Lords of the lands were weak and scattered, rendered ineffective by factional wars. It was only through the valiant efforts of an itinerant adventurer that the foul Mondain was tracked to his hidden lair and slain.

But a few years of restless peace followed Mondain's downfall. So long had the world shuddered beneath Mondain's yoke that many found it hard to believe he had been really vanquished. In truth, his teachings did not disappear. Mondain's apprentice Minax rose to power soon thereafter to challenge the fledgling city-states that were beginning to evolve The Terrors had begun anew.

Minax's powers upon maturity greatly exceeded those of her evil mentor. With these powers she was able to rain wholesale destruction upon the planet, twisting and corrupting everything. Her foul web spread through time itself, ensnaring all who sought to oppose her. Finally, there arose a hero out of legend who dared face Minax in her own fiery castle and destroy her. Thus ended the Second Era of Darkness, as told in **Ultima II.**

1



Twenty years of well-earned tranquillity ensued and prosperity favored the land. Then disturbing omens appeared, followed by the mysterious appearance of a fiery island. The tale of the Third Era of the Dark Ages is told by Iolo the Bard in **Ultima III** — wherein Lord British, sovereign of an incipient empire in the land of Sosaria, called forth through time and space for Heroes of the People to assemble Four diverse adventurers answered this clarion call. To them fell the geas of the Doom of Exodus. Long they labored on the trail of the mysterious Exodus, through many a deep dungeon which seared their souls. To this day, each member of that team bears the marks of their journey. With the aid of the mystical Time Lord they were successful in bypassing the Great Earth Serpent and gaining access to Exodus' island fortress. The very bricks of the fortress rose up against them, and great is the Bard's tale of their struggle to reach their mortal foe. Of the final confrontation not one of them will speak, save to say that the evil is gone from this plane So passed the third member of the Triad of Evil and with this death, so passed the Dark Ages of Britannia.

From the rubble of Sosaria, Lord British was able to unite all the mainland and a few of the islands under his one rule. This new Empire of Britannia brought much sought-after peace and prosperity to its subjects. Many of the ancient pockets of evil were destroyed, so that the only remaining hazard to wayfarers was the occasional stray band of marauding orcs or hill giants. Most of the lands were mapped, although a few unexplored regions still remain. With the Triad of Evil destroyed, Lord British became known for his dedication to raising the quality of life of his subjects To assist in this endeavor, three mighty structures were raised in distant parts of the realm. One was the Lycaeum, wherein lay the great observatory. Another was the Empath Abbey with its oak groves where wise men and women meditated upon the teachings of the ancients. The third structure was the great castle of the Knight's Order of the Silver Serpent. Only the flower of Lord British's chivalry was invited to join this order, which embodied the highest ideals and exemplary bravery. The rest of the land was divided among eight major towns, each with its own political faction. Numerous satellite villages also dotted the countryside between the towns. In this manner were Lord British's lands organized.

2

Two pages from *Ultima IV*'s 'History of Britannia' booklet that came with every copy of the game

"Yes," I replied. "They put it in there because they expected you to read it." "Wow," he responded.

Some of their difficulties must be chalked up to poor teaching. I should have done a better job of preparing them for the assignment. I resisted holding their hands because in the past I've found it useful to plop them down in Britannia and let them struggle. Figure out the systems, grasp the mechanics, and go forth. *Ultima IV* may be a high mountain to climb for a 19-year-old *Call of Duty* player, but it's well worth the effort.

At least that's what I used to think. Now it seems to me we're facing basic literacy issues. These eager players are willing to try something new but, in the case of a game like *Ultima IV*, the required skill set and the basic assumptions the game makes are so foreign to them that the game has indeed become virtually unplayable.

And as much as I hate to say it – even after they learn to craft potions, speak to every villager, and take notes on what they say – it isn't much fun for them. They want a radar in the corner of the screen. They want mission logs. They want fun combat. They want an in-game tutorial. They want a game that doesn't feel like so much work.

I'm pretty sure I'll continue to teach *Ultima IV*. The series is simply too foundational to overlook, and I can develop new teaching strategies. But I believe we've finally reached the point where the gap separating today's generation of gamers from those of us who once drew maps on grid paper is nearly unbridgeable.

These wonderful old games are still valuable, of course, and I don't mean to suggest we should toss them in the dustbin.

But if we're interested in preserving our history and teaching students about why these games matter, a "play this game and sink or swim" approach won't work anymore. The question for me at this point is how to balance the process of learning and discovery I want them to have inside the game with their need for basic remedial help.

I love great old games like *Ultima IV*, but I can no longer assume the game will make its case for greatness all by itself.

September 22, 2010

Michael Abbott writes and hosts the Brainy Gamer blog and podcast, devoted to videogames and the community of gamers.

Cartography

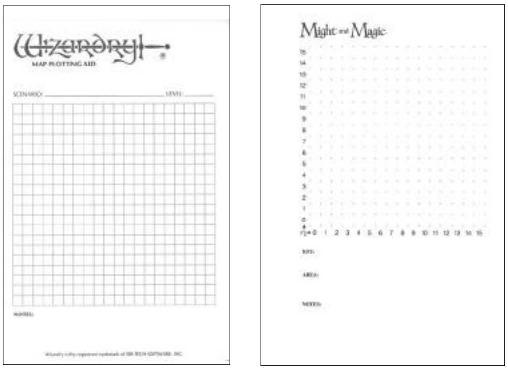
by Scorpia

Many gamers today take auto-mapping for granted. Very likely, they couldn't imagine a product without it. We of the (cough) "elder generation", however, know otherwise. Those who go back to the "golden era of gaming" remember well, perhaps all too well, the joys of manual cartography.

I learned my lesson fairly early. It wasn't long, as I wandered in the mazes of *Colossal Cave* and *Zork*, before I realised that random scraps of paper or sheets stolen from the printer just weren't going to do the job. It was time to get professional about this. I bought a stack of graph paper, a package of pencils, and that most important item, a blister pack of erasers.

Actually, mapping out the adventure games usually wasn't too bad. Aside from an occasional nasty trick or mean maze, they were pretty straightforward and, most importantly, nothing was out there waiting for lunch. RPGs, however, were quite another matter.

Despite being on mere 8-bit machines, the RPGs were big, and seemed all the larger because mapping was a very slow process. There you were (or I was), carefully pencilling in one step at a time, and there all the critters were, ready to pounce and rip out your heart, lungs and assorted other organs for appetizers.



Some companies, such as Sir-Tech and New World Computing, would even include graph paper sheets in their games' boxes

In no time at all, you were turned around, and only twenty minutes later (if you were lucky), did you realise your careful cartography was somewhat inaccurate. It's amazing how many erasers you could go through mapping out just one game.

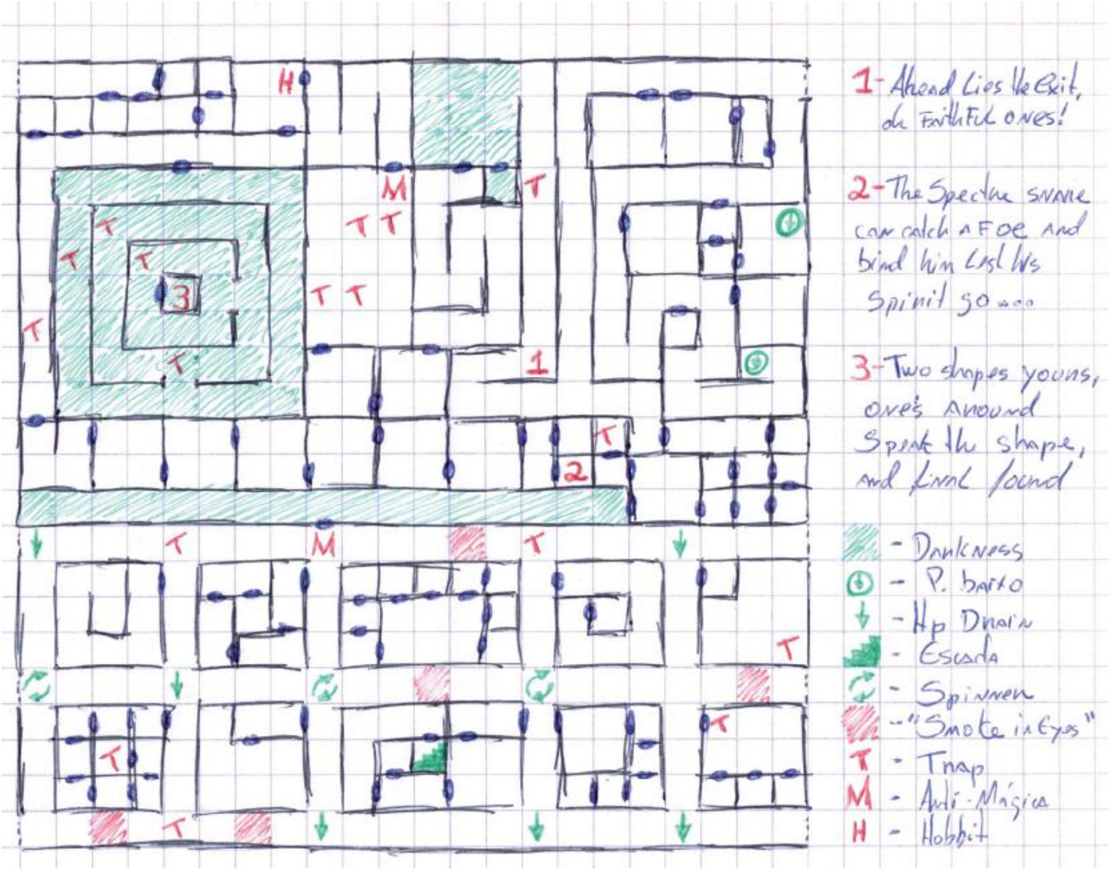
The prime example for huge was the first *Might and Magic*. I still have my 50+ maps from that one. Yep, that many. It seems incredible now, to look at those old sheets, and ponder the time and effort needed to draw the maps, one step at a time.

There was one saving grace, though: the dungeons were all standardised, being the same size and shape. Naturally, size was different in different games, but if you were doing *M&M*, you could count on each outdoor area, each town, each dungeon level, being the same 16 × 16 square.

Of course, that meant 256 happy little steps per section, each one carefully mapped. With notes, naturally, on where things were found, where traps were, where messages appeared (and what they said), and so on. And fighting off monsters galore almost every step of the way (it's odd how Monsters Galore showed up in every RPG; busy little critter!).

While *Might and Magic* was the most excessive in terms of mapping, other games weren't far behind. *The Bard's Tale*, for instance, required a fair amount of cartographical effort, though it featured a mere one town and no outdoors. Seventeen maps for that one, each a generous 22 × 22 in size, and our friend, Monsters, waiting for us everywhere.

I don't know if it's possible to adequately convey what it meant to map-as-you-go. This was work, real work. OK, you knew the size of the dungeon, drew it on the graph paper, numbered the sides, and usually knew your starting point. Say it was X3, Y5; here were the stairs out. Everything else was unknown.


H
M
T
1
2
3
1- Ahead Lies the Exit, oh Faithful ones!
2- The Spectre snare can catch a Foe and bind him lest his Spirit go...
3- Two shapes yours, one's around Speak the shape, and final found
- Darkness
- P. barxo
- Hp Drain
- Escada
- Spinner
- "Smoke in Eyes"
T - Trap
M - Anti-Magica
H - Hobbit

A map from *Bard's Tale*, filled with spinners and dark areas; be glad it isn't a teleporter maze

So you started off, taking a step, drawing lines on your map, and hoping against hope that you hadn't just stepped on a spinner that turned your merry band in another direction, or worse, an undetectable teleporter that just sent you halfway across the dungeon without you realising it.

Beyond that, there were nasty little places where everyone took damage as they walked through, where magic was suppressed, where it was totally dark, where you could walk into pits or chutes, or any combination of the foregoing. And remember, our pal Monsters was there, too, practically every other step.

Yet we persevered. We mapped. We fought. We erased. We screamed and cursed and muttered (maybe louder than muttered) imprecations against the evil designers. Then we mapped and fought and erased and screamed some more.

We could take it. We were tough. We were dedicated. We were hardcore gamers. We were masochists. Nothing else could explain why, the moment a game was finished, we put aside the old maps, reached for a fresh sheet of paper, and started on the next RPG.

It's a pity there was no Game Scouts of America to hand out merit badges for Cartography. Not one of us earned one, and we still have the calluses to prove it.

Ah yes, the golden age of gaming. In many ways, it was a good time. But y'know, there are some things about it I don't miss at all …

Copyright © 2006 Scorpia. Reprinted by permission.

Scorpia is one of the most fondly remembered game journalists. From the '80s through to April 1999, she was a lead reviewer of, and hint giver for, adventure and role-playing games at Computer Gaming World magazine. Scorpia also ran game-related areas on Compuserve (the original GameSIG), Delphi (GameSIG), AOL (Scorpia's Lair), and GEnie (Games RoundTable).

From Prussia with love: The origin of RPGs

by Craig Stern

Computer RPGs began to appear in the ’70s, more or less contemporaneously with the arrival and popularisation of pen-and-paper role-playing games, which are themselves the children of historical wargames. Thus, the CRPG has only been around for a few decades but its history reaches all the way back to the 1800s.

Baron von Reisswitz is credited with creating the first true wargame – that is, a game meant to simulate battles with a certain degree of fidelity, and not merely a chess derivative. Created in the early 1810s, this game went by the name *Kriegsspiel* (meaning “War Game” in German). It featured units actually in use by the military of the day, and was meant to simulate battles. Character creation was a matter of faithfully emulating the real-world characteristics of the units those pieces represented, then using die rolls to simulate unforeseen factors in resolving combat.

Von Reisswitz’s son created a revised version of the game in 1824. The revised *Kriegsspiel* paid such close attention to accuracy that the Chief of Prussian General Staff recommended it as a military exercise; the King of Prussia, in turn, actually ordered that every regiment of the army be supplied with a copy.

Taktisches
Kriegs Spiel

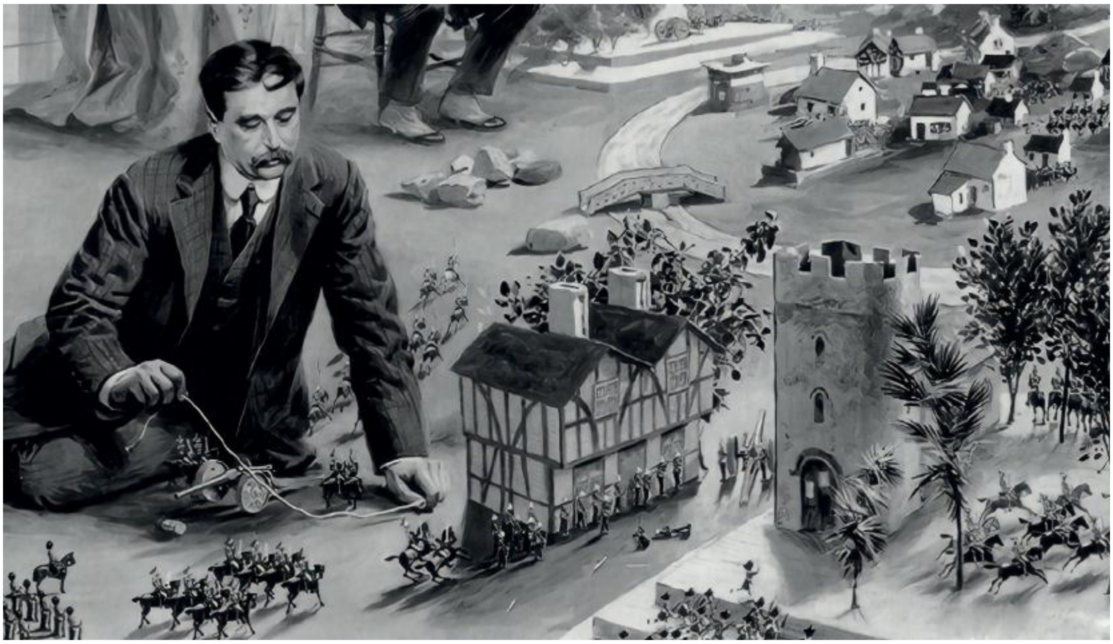
In 1811, a special table full of drawers was made so that King Wilhelm III could play *Kriegsspiel*; the table is still around, kept at the Charlottenburg Palace in Berlin

In 1876, Colonel Julius Adrian Friedrich Wilhelm von Verdy du Vernois produced a third version of *Kriegsspiel*. Vernois was suspicious of the idea that military outcomes could be predetermined according to fixed rules, and replaced die rolls with the mediation of impartial “umpires” who would determine the outcomes of various engagements based on their knowledge and experience (yes, the first Dungeon Masters were Prussian military men from the 1800s).

The American military began putting out its own wargames around this time, with *Jane’s Fighting Ships* following suit across the Atlantic in 1898. Like *Kriegsspiel, Jane’s Fighting Ships* spelled out the characteristics of the game’s numerous units in astonishing detail. (Google Books has a digitised copy of the rulebook online, so you can see for yourself just how intricate this got.)

Even H.G. Wells, the renowned writer, got in on the action, producing *Little Wars* in 1913. The rules of *Little Wars* were far simpler than those of other wargames, but it generally followed the practice of simulating large-scale battles, with the characteristics of different unit types decided rigidly according to the type of troops each unit represented.

It wasn’t until the early ’70s that wargames started delving into the idea of individual men and women as units. The games that did this eventually became known as “man-to-man wargames” (not to be confused with Steve Jackson’s ruleset of the same name). It may seem obvious to us now, but this focus on individual men and women was such a radical departure from wargaming tradition that it wouldn’t be mentioned in the rules for Gary Gygax’s *Chainmail* until 1971, three years after *Chainmail*’s initial publication.



Illustrated London News picture from 1913, showing H. G. Wells at his house, measuring unit movement with a string

Even then, it seems the man-to-man rules in *Chainmail* were largely an afterthought, relegated to a mere two pages out of the entire 44-page book. There, too, character creation remained a matter of looking up prefabricated unit values in a table.

Things changed dramatically with the publication of *Dungeons & Dragons* in 1974. It retained many of *Chainmail*'s rules, centring character creation around selecting from three main classes of character: Fighting Men, Magic-Users and Clerics.

However, before selecting a class, *D&D* first had players roll three six-sided dice to determine abilities: Strength, Intelligence, Wisdom, Constitution, Dexterity, and Charisma. These would, in turn, impact how well-suited the character was to a given class, imposing bonuses (or penalties!) based on their chosen class's primary statistic.

This wholly upended the method of character creation that had prevailed up until that point. Statistics were no longer determined by class: instead, characters got statistics, and only then chose a class based on which roles the statistics made available to them. This approach would form the basis of numerous classic computer RPGs.

RPGs continued to diverge from wargames as the genre developed, and so too did their character creation systems. With increased focus on unique, individual characters came an increased focus on the abilities and limitations of each individual character. At their peak, these considerations would come to supplant the notion of character class entirely.

Published in 1986, Steve Jackson's *GURPS* represented a coming of age for skill-based RPG systems. *GURPS* characters have no classes at all – rather, they have four primary attributes and a huge variety of skills that can be levelled independently of one another.

In a way, this represented the zenith of the individual-focused approach to character creation. All vestiges of the old system were gone: in the skill-based paradigm, characters became unique, fully realised individuals rather than mere instances of a uniform military unit to be used in battle simulations.

This approach became quite popular among pen-and-paper role-players, not just with *GURPS*, but later with the RPGs published by White Wolf, such as *Mage: The Ascension* and *Vampire: The Masquerade*. *GURPS* would strongly influence the SPECIAL ruleset eventually used in the *Fallout* series; and *Vampire: The Masquerade*'s rules would form the basis for *Vampire: Bloodlines*.

But we're getting ahead of ourselves here – although pen-and-paper role-playing games would directly influence CRPGs for many years, CRPGs have a history all their own, beginning humbly with the tinkerings of bored university students in the mid-'70s.

Craig Stern is the founder of Sinister Design, and creator of Telepath Tactics and True Messiah: www.truemessiahgame.com.

The PLATO RPGs

by Felipe Pepe

With home computers being so omnipresent in our daily lives, it's odd to realise just how recent a technology they are. It was only in the mid-'70s that home computers began to appear – before then, all we had were giant machines that would weigh tons and occupy entire floors.

Yet some of these computers were way ahead of their time. The legendary "Mother of All Demos" presentation, made by Douglas Engelbart in 1968, shows him using a mouse and window-based GUI, clicking on hyperlinks and chatting with a colleague via video conference while co-editing an online text.

One such avant-garde computer system was the PLATO (Programmed Logic for Automatic Teaching Operations). Created in 1960, it was a giant mainframe with user-friendly terminals designed to teach university students via a series of virtual lessons.

A PLATO terminal, with its distinctive orange plasma display; by 1976 there were 950 of these terminals across the globe

The PLATO IV system, introduced in 1972, went as far as to offer vector-based graphics, a touch-screen interface and an Internet-like network, connected to thousands of other terminals across the globe.

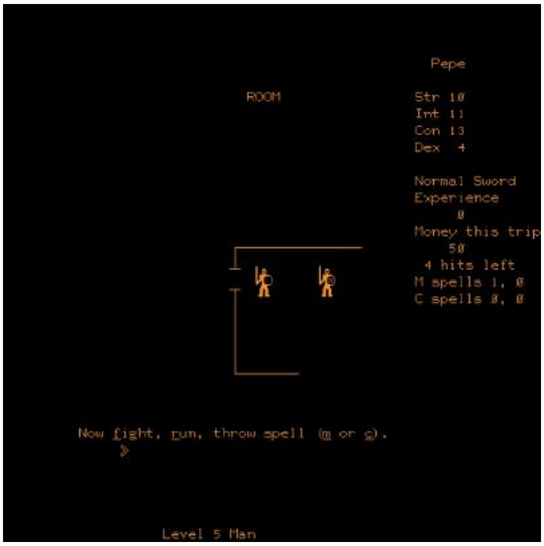
Students soon found that all this could be used to create games as well, and titles like *Empire* (1973) and *Spasim* (1974) began to appear. *Empire* is particularly impressive: it is a game in which up to 30 players battle in a top-down space arena, shooting each other's ships and fighting to control the galaxy – all this in 1973!

When *Dungeons & Dragons* came out in 1974, it unleashed the perfect storm: powerful computers, bored programming students and a statistics-driven game that was begging for automation. The result was the birth of Computer Role-Playing Games.

Sadly, not all of them survived. PLATO was still an educational system, so its administrators would delete unauthorised games. As such, we lost all records of *m119h*, the first CRPG ever made, created in 1974. But its successors escaped – hidden under nondescript names like *pedit5* or saved by students, they were played by thousands and influenced many later titles.

Thanks to the effort of Cyber1, a community created to preserve the PLATO legacy, these early CRPGs are still available and can be freely played. However, keep in mind that some of them have been updated since the '70s – *Oubliette*'s title screen even has an ad for its iPhone remake – so they aren't the exact versions people were playing back in the day, but they still give us a good idea of how things were.

If you want to learn more about PLATO, I wholeheartedly recommend *The Friendly Orange Glow: The Untold Story of the PLATO System and the Dawn of Cyberculture* by Brian Dear (2017). While somewhat light on the gaming side of things, the book is the best resource available on PLATO and its influence.



```
                                  Pepe

                 ROOM           Str 10
                                Int 11
                                Con 13
                                Dex  4

                                Normal Sword
                                Experience
                                     0
                                Money this trip
                                    50
                                 4 hits left
                                M spells 1, 0
                                C spells 0, 0

     Now fight, run, throw spell (m or c).
         »

              Level 5 Man
```

The Dungeon / pedit5 (1975)

Created by Reginald “Rusty” Rutherford at the University of Illinois, this is the oldest playable CRPG. Officially called *The Dungeon,* it was hidden among the PLATO files under the name *pedit5* to avoid being found and deleted by the system administrators.

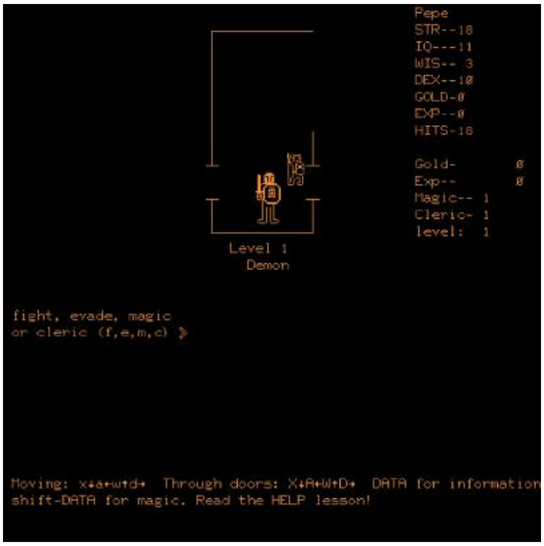
Despite its age, the game holds up quite well. You start by typing a name. The game then rolls your attributes – Strength, Dexterity, Constitution and Intelligence – and you’re off to the dungeon.

Visually the game resembles a Roguelike, although it predates *Rogue* (1980). You explore a maze-like top-down dungeon, searching for treasure and battling monsters – if you die, your character is erased. Your goal is to collect 20,000 XP and return to the entrance. Succeed, and your name is added to the Hall of Fame.

The dungeon layout is fixed and has only one floor, but it’s quite large and also features secret passages. Random encounters will occur as you explore, with the game prompting you to fight, cast a spell or flee.

There’s a surprising amount of depth here, with 16 spells available. These are a selection of classic *D&D* spells, such as Magic Missile (deals damage), Invisibility (escapes combat), Cure (heals you) and Charm (ends combat). Enemies even have different spell resistances: you can’t use Sleep on an Undead.

As such, *pedit5* is not only an important historical artefact, it’s also a good game, especially for the time. It’s a short dungeon romp with enough variety in enemies and spells to sustain repeated runs in search of high scores. It would take years before home-computer CRPGs could match this level of sophistication.



```
                                          Pepe
                                          STR--18
                                          IQ---11
                                          WIS-- 3
                                          DEX--10
                                          GOLD-0
                                          EXP--0
                                          HITS-18

                                          Gold-        0
                                          Exp--        0
                                          Magic-- 1
                                          Cleric- 1
                                          level:  1
                        Level 1
                         Demon

fight, evade, magic
or cleric (f,e,m,c) »




Moving: x↓a←w↑d→  Through doors: X↓A←W↑D→  DATA for information
shift-DATA for magic. Read the HELP lesson!
```

dnd (1975)

Despite trying to cleverly hide itself, *pedit5* was eventually deleted from the PLATO system (luckily, a copy was saved by a student). In its wake came *dnd*, created by Ray Wood and Gary Whisenhunt.

Since Wood was one of the administrators of the PLATO system, his game was openly hosted and enjoyed long-lasting popularity, with constant updates based on player feedback.

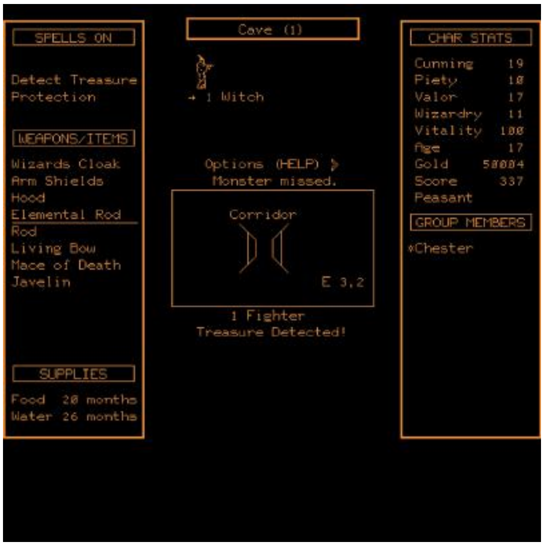
At its core, the game is very similar to *pedit5*, but with more detailed character artwork, additional monsters and spells, and a few extra features, such as being able to re-roll your initial stats.

Initially, the game only had one dungeon floor, but the creators kept expanding it. Inspired by pinball machines, they decided to add a high-score system. Since players then began to just race to collect gold and exit the dungeon, they decided to add an end goal: to retrieve the Orb, which was guarded by the Dragon – the first boss fight in a videogame.

The creators later handed the reins to Dirk Pellet, who kept on improving the game. He added new magical items, potions, a bag for holding and even an auto-fight feature when encountering weak monsters. The most iconic item was the Genie Lamp, which could be used to make a wish: you would literally write a request to the game administrators, who would read it and, hopefully, grant your wish.

All this additional content makes *dnd* much more complex than *pedit5*, but also harder and longer. Later versions of *dnd* had as many as 15 floors, with any sense of balance thrown out of the window.

In 2012, The RPG Fanatic made an extensive video interview with *dnd*’s creators, which can be found on YouTube.



```
SPELLS ON                  Cave (1)              CHAR STATS

Detect Treasure                                  Cunning     19
Protection               → 1 Witch               Piety       10
                                                 Valor       17
WEAPONS/ITEMS                                    Wizardry    11
                                                 Vitality   100
Wizards Cloak                                    Age         17
Arm Shields              Options (HELP) ▸        Gold     50004
Hood                     Monster missed.         Score      337
Elemental Rod                                    Peasant
Rod                        Corridor
Living Bow                                       GROUP MEMBERS
Mace of Death                                    *Chester
Javelin                              E 3,2
                          1 Fighter
                      Treasure Detected!

SUPPLIES

Food   20 months
Water  26 months
```

Moria (1975)

Both *pedit5* and *dnd* followed a similar structure, but *Moria* was a radical departure. Possibly inspired by *Maze War* (1973), *Moria* used wire-frame graphics to display the dungeon in a first-person view.

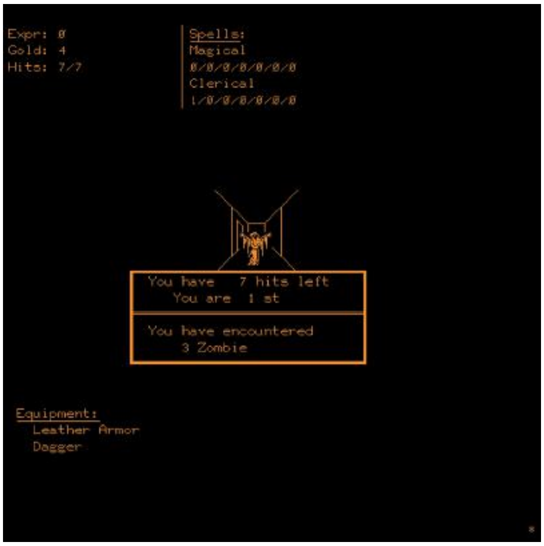
Also, despite its name, the authors weren't familiar with *D&D* or *Lord of the Rings*; they just played *dnd* and decided to make something like it. As such, it abandons *D&D*'s traditional stats, enemies and spells.

Moria's four stats – Cunning, Piety, Valour and Wizardry – are based on a 0–100 scale and increase with use. Each stat is also tied to a guild, such as Valour being used by the Knights' Guild. Instead of levelling up by earning XP, you must join a guild and pay to increase in rank, earning special bonuses as you rise.

All stats are useful in battle – Valour influences your attacks and Wizardry is used to cast spells, but Cunning is used to trick enemies into a critical attack and Piety can destroy some enemy types. Money now has a use, as stores offer dozens of weapons for sale (you can even haggle). Just don't forget to purchase water and food rations, or you'll die of starvation.

More importantly, *Moria* is actually an online multiplayer RPG. The world is shared with up to ten players, who can band together to form a party! *Moria*'s world is absolutely massive, with a large city and over 200 areas. The downside is that the game has no real end goal and its areas are just empty mazes filled with increasingly challenging enemies.

Extremely innovative, *Moria* is basically a giant sandbox for players to meet, explore and grow in power. Every MMORPG out there owes it a nod.



```
Expr: 0              Spells:
Gold: 4              Magical
Hits: 7/7            0/0/0/0/0/0/0
                     Clerical
                     1/0/0/0/0/0/0


            You have   7 hits left
               You are  1 st

            You have encountered
                 3 Zombie

 Equipment:
   Leather Armor
   Dagger
```

Oubliette (1977)

If *dnd* was the follow-up to *pedit5*, then *Oubliette* is the follow up to *Moria*. Still a multiplayer game, it expands upon its predecessor in almost every way.

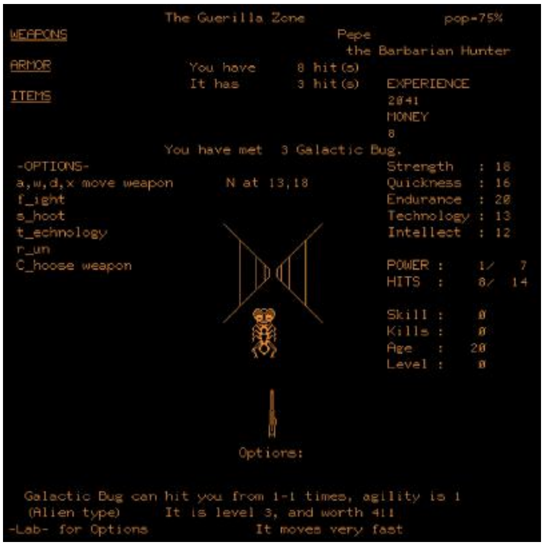
Moria had four character classes by means of the four guilds in town, but *Oubliette* expands that to 15 races and 15 classes, each with its own stats requirements! You have the usual Tolkien and *D&D* options, a few exotic ones like Ninja and Courtesan, plus some taken from *Lord Foul's Bane*, a high fantasy novel written by Stephen R. Donaldson in 1977.

Oubliette begins at a large castle town on top of a 10-level dungeon, featuring several equipment shops, a casino with gambling mini-games, a temple where fallen characters can be resurrected (if their bodies are retrieved by other players) and even a place where you can purchase charmed monsters to take into the dungeon to help you in combat.

Spellcasting was also expanded to use a system of magic words. For example, in order to cast the "Light" spell you have to type DUMAPIC.

By now, *Wizardry* veterans may be thinking that a lot of that sounds familiar. Indeed, Andrew Greenberg and Robert Woodhead were PLATO users and clearly took a lot from *Oubliette*, which led to many complaints of plagiarism from other PLATO users.

Oubliette would also greatly influence *Mordor: Depths of Dejenol* (1995) and *Demise: Rise of the Ku'tan* (1999). Very few games can claim to still be inspiring successors more than 20 years after release. For those curious to try it, *Oubliette* had iPhone and Android versions released in 2010.



```
                 The Guerilla Zone              pop-75%
WEAPONS                            Pepe
                                    the Barbarian Hunter
ARMOR             You have     8 hit(s)
                  It has       3 hit(s)    EXPERIENCE
ITEMS                                      2041
                                           MONEY
                                           8
                 You have met  3 Galactic Bug.
 -OPTIONS-                                 Strength   : 18
 a,w,d,x move weapon      N at 13,18       Quickness  : 16
 f_ight                                    Endurance  : 20
 s_hoot                                    Technology : 13
 t_echnology                               Intellect  : 12
 r_un
 C_hoose weapon                            POWER :    1/   7
                                           HITS  :    8/  14

                                           Skill :    0
                                           Kills :    0
                                           Age   :   20
                                           Level :    0


                         Options:

  Galactic Bug can hit you from 1-1 times, agility is 1
  (Alien type)     It is level 3, and worth 411
-Lab- for Options              It moves very fast
```

Futurewar (1977)

PLATO had a lot more than just fantasy RPGs. Games like *Empire* showed that students had a passion for spaceships, sci-fi tabletop RPGs like *Traveller* were starting to appear and *Star Wars* (1977) had just come out. *Futurewar,* then, was PLATO's first sci-fi RPG.

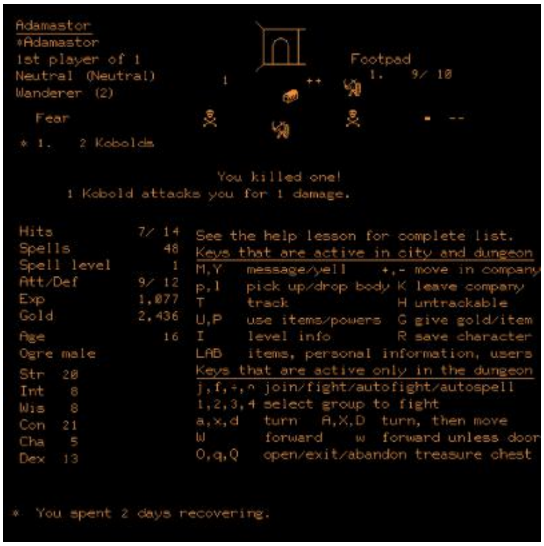
The game sends players through time to the "far future" year of 2020, in which nuclear war has destroyed the Earth and created an army of mutants. You start by choosing a team – Americans, Guerrillas, Barbarians, Martians or Cyborgs – each with its starting location and bonuses. Then, you roll your stats and can choose one of eight classes, such as Soldier, Medic, Spy and Holy Man.

Futurewar is another multiplayer RPG based on exploring dungeons, but it adds several twists, such as environmental hazards: you might step on a mine, or be poisoned by radioactive waste. It also includes a radar, which can detect nearby players and enemies.

While still based on stats, with various different weapons available, it's also a sort of early FPS. When combat begins, your gun appears on screen and you must aim and shoot to hit. There's a short time limit for each turn, effectively making combat feel real-time.

Thus, in a sense, *Futurewar* was the first FPS/RPG hybrid. Another novelty is having a soldier shooting demons in real-time (ish) inside a maze, which would later appear in one of the biggest games of all time.

Of course, none of *Doom*'s creators had access to PLATO, and even back in the '70s *Futurewar* wasn't a very popular game. But it's interesting to see how shooting demons always had a special appeal.



```
Adamastor
*Adamastor
1st player of 1                          Footpad
Neutral (Neutral)         1         ++       1.   9/ 10
Wanderer (2)

  Fear

* 1.   2 Kobolds


                    You killed one!
      1 Kobold attacks you for 1 damage.

 Hits           7/ 14  See the help lesson for complete list.
 Spells            48  Keys that are active in city and dungeon
 Spell level        1  M,Y   message/yell     +,- move in company
 Att/Def        9/ 12  p,l   pick up/drop body K leave company
 Exp            1,077  T     track             H untrackable
 Gold           2,436  U,P   use items/powers  G give gold/item
 Age               16  I     level info        R save character
 Ogre male             LAB   items, personal information, users
 Str  20               Keys that are active only in the dungeon
 Int   8               j,f,÷,^ join/fight/autofight/autospell
 Wis   8               1,2,3,4 select group to fight
 Con  21               a,x,d   turn  A,X,D  turn, then move
 Cha   5               W       forward   w  forward unless door
 Dex  13               O,q,Q   open/exit/abandon treasure chest


* You spent 2 days recovering.
```

Avatar (1979)

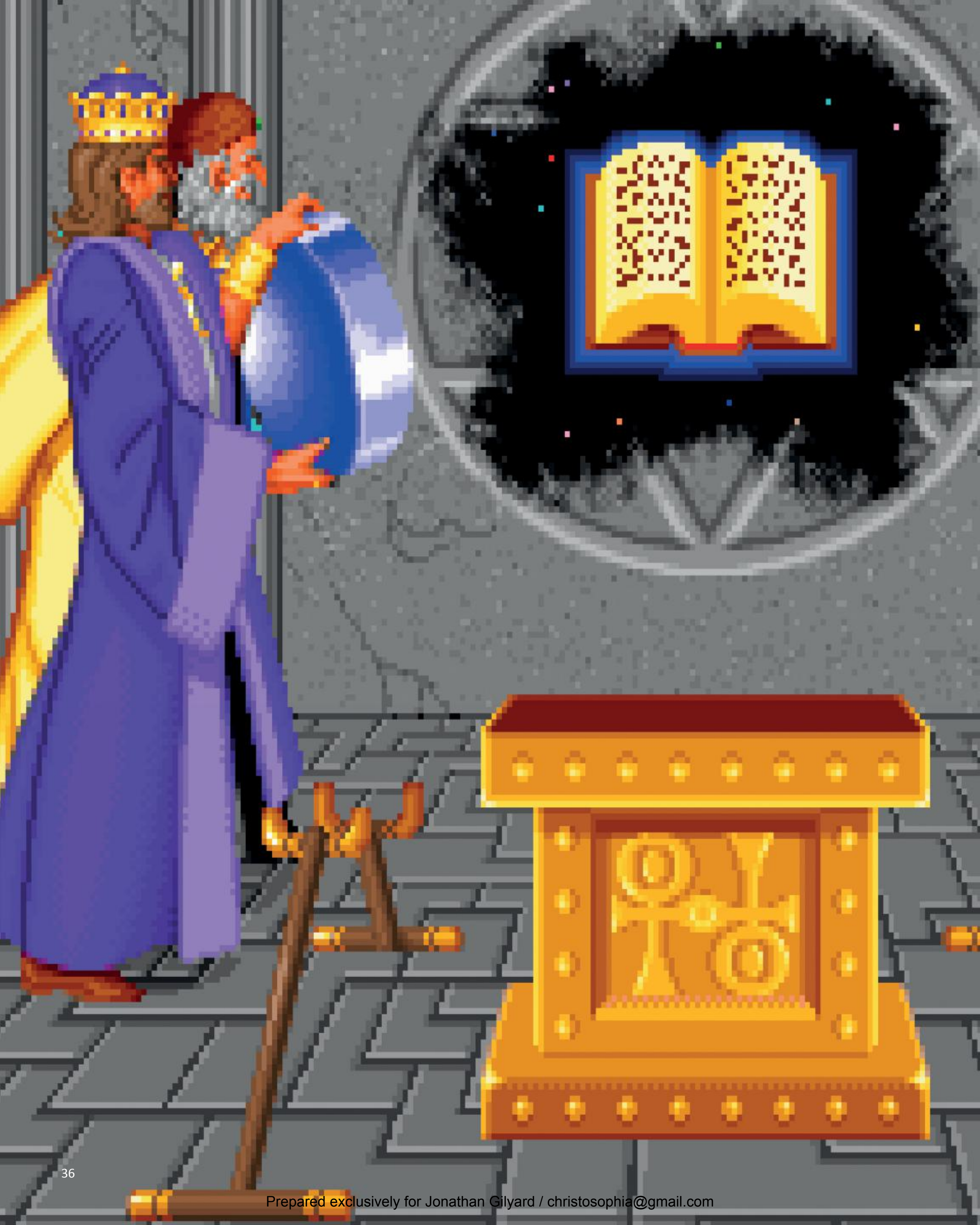
Avatar would be the last of the big PLATO games, intentionally designed to surpass all previous RPGs on the platform, drawing on the best each had to offer.

The game features 10 races and 11 classes, also tied to guilds in town. As in *Oubliette*, you start at a castle on top of a huge, 15-level dungeon, but, instead of having to walk around, the town is presented as a menu (as per the later *Wizardry*). Another similarity is the many new hazards inside the dungeon, such as pits, zones of darkness, spinners and anti-magic areas. Enemies are also much more deadly, and able to cause status effects, such as Poison, Sleep or Paralysis.

According to Richard Bartle, *Avatar* soon became "the most successful PLATO game ever – it accounted for 6% of all the hours spent on the system between September 1978 and May 1985". It was so complex it had a staff of volunteers that helped run everything, much like GMs in modern MMORPGs. This also allowed for custom quests that required players to hunt down certain monsters on a certain floor.

There are even reports of players bribing admins to get powerful in-game items or resurrect their characters after a failed spell teleported them into a stone wall, as well as graduating players selling their characters before losing access to PLATO.

Avatar was constantly updated over the years and still lives on the Cyber1 servers. The latest version is from 1995 and still enjoys some popularity.



The Reviews

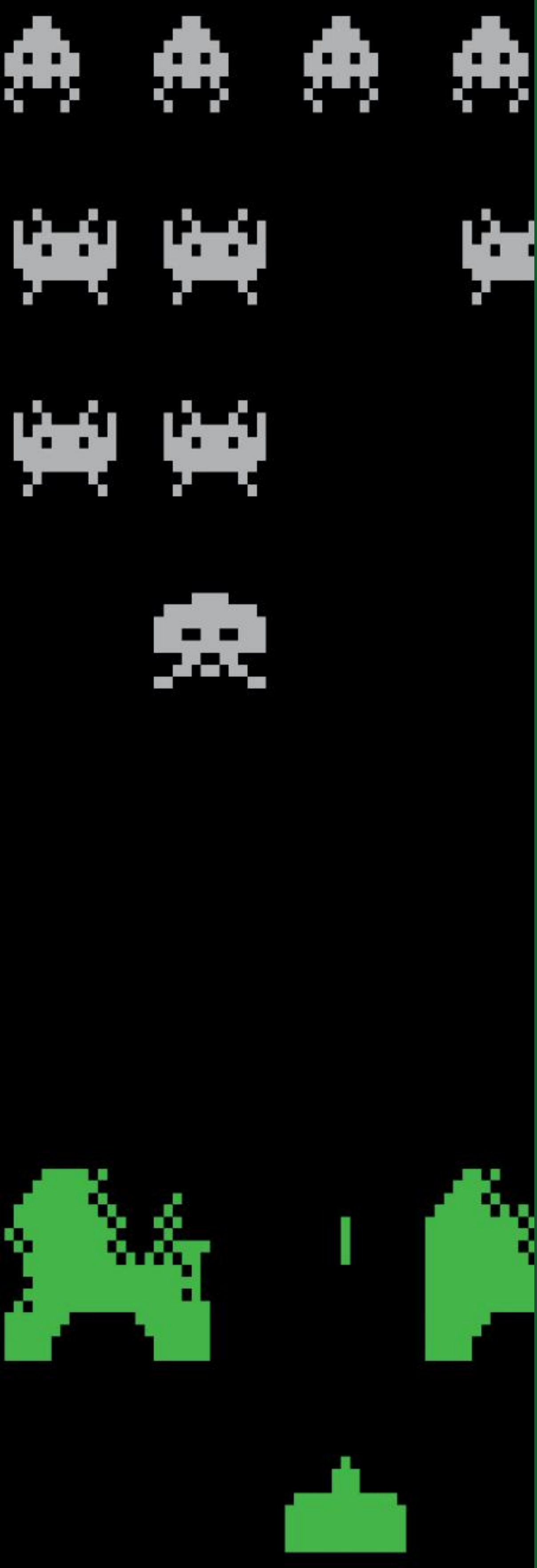
This is the meat of the book. Over the next pages you'll find information on over 400 RPGs, all written by fans, modders, developers and journalists, listed in chronological order and full of screenshots, quotes from developers and even mod suggestions. The idea is to serve both as a timeline of the genre and a guide to help players get the most out of their games.

This section is divided into nine chapters, each featuring a span of 5 years, from 1975 to 2019. These showcase the events that happened during those years, plus add a brief overview of the changes in the gaming world during that period, giving context to the games and the technological revolution that empowered them.

It is important to keep in mind that these are only a fraction of the thousands of RPGs released during the last four decades. These titles stand out from a modern viewpoint, but games weren't always as easily available as they are today. People at the time had very different experiences based on what was locally available for their hardware of choice – for example, a British gamer with a ZX Spectrum had no access to *Ultima* or *Wizardry* and would instead enjoy less notable RPGs such as *Swords & Sorcery* (1985).

While this section only covers games that had official releases in English, there are special sections at the end to examine dozens of extremely important games that were never translated.

Lord British and the Gargoyles read the Codex of Ultimate Wisdom, in *Ultima VI: The False Prophet*



1975-1979:

The beginning of the digital invasion

It's no easy task to pinpoint the birth of video games. *Tennis for Two*, created in 1958, is an often-cited starting point, while others name 1962's *Spacewar!* or 1950's *Bertie the Brain*. All have their own merits.

Since the first surviving CRPGs were developed in 1975 for PLATO, that will be the starting point of this book. This is convenient since the second half of the '70s was when the videogame revolution really took off, spreading across home computers, videogame consoles and arcades.

Consoles began to appear in 1972, led by the Magnavox Odyssey. These were very crude machines, mostly only capable of running *Pong* and other very similar games pre-built into the hardware.

The second generation of consoles introduced the concept of ROM cartridges, allowing for companies to create and sell new games for the same machines, much like today's consoles. While it had a slow start, the Atari 2600 would become a massive hit thanks to the arrival of classic games like *Enduro, River Raid, Pitfall* and *Space Invaders*.

Computers, on the other hand, were still huge mainframes kept in universities, large companies and research centres. Some smaller models existed, but they were either prohibitively expensive or too slow to even handle BASIC. This began to change with the Altair 8800. Small, cheap (for a computer) and with enough power to be actually useful, the Altair sold thousands of units and was the first commercially successful home computer. On its heels came the Apple II, Commodore PET and TRS-80 – the famous "1977 trinity" of home computers.

While the Altair 8800 was made for hobbyists, these three machines were built for mass production, aimed at non-technical users. However, although they were much more versatile than a game console, home computers were expensive, extremely complicated to use and still struggled to offer something other than very simple applications and games.

They were highly profitable, but still sold mostly to businesses, gamers or hobbyists, and their popularity was relative – while the TRS-80 sold 200,000 units, the Atari 2600 console sold 30 million units.

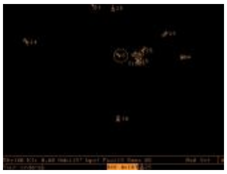
Computer games themselves were also little more than curiosities. A few, rare commercial titles were sold inside ziplock bags, but most came from technical magazines and books such as David H. Ahl's *101 BASIC Computer Games* (1973), which contained pages filled with BASIC code that people would type in their computers, manually recreating the games.

Arcades were also still a small business, less popular than pinball machines. They would grow steadily over the next few years, then explode with *Space Invaders* in 1979, ushering in a golden age for arcades.

In five years, videogames went from *Pong* to a rich ecosystem with multiple genres, platforms and audiences. And this was just the start.

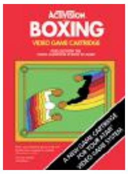
Trends:

PLATO Games: Home computers were just appearing, but American universities had had large educational mainframes since the '60s. The most famous was the PLATO network, which came to host several games made by students (hidden from system administrators). Due to the mainframe's power, these games often had innovative features far beyond what an Atari 2600 or Apple II could offer. *Empire,* for example, allowed students from campuses all over the US to join in online multiplayer battles way back in 1973!



Empire is a multiplayer turn-based space game made by John Daleske in 1973

Atari vs Activision: Atari was rigid with its employees – they weren't paid much and got no credit for the games they designed. Noticing how much money their games made, a group of developers left the company and started their own, Activision, in 1979. Atari sued them for developing games for the Atari 2600, but the court decided people could play whatever they wanted on their consoles. Activision became the first third-party publisher and opened the doors for others to do the same, setting the stage for the crash in 1983.



Boxing, released in 1980 for the Atari 2600, was one of the first games by Activision

BBS: Private systems like the PLATO network already allowed users to post messages online, and the advent of home computers and modems soon brought that experience to households as well. The first public BBS (Bulletin Board System) went online in 1978, hosting discussions between computer hobbyists in Chicago. Over the years BBSs would grow to offer all sorts of services, from online games to paid file hosting. They peaked in popularity during the early and mid-'90s, when they began to be replaced by the Internet.

BBSs like ExecPC were very popular during the '90s and allowed the sharing of freeware and shareware games, like *Doom*

The **Altair 8800** is released. An early pioneer, it was the first commercially successful home computer, proving that there was a market for them.

The **Apple II** was the first mass-market home computer. The only early system to have colour, it became a popular games device.

The **TRS-80** computer arrives. Created by Tandy, owner of the widely distributed Radio Shack electronics stores, it outsold the Apple II for years.

The **Commodore PET** is released. The first model was criticised for its small keyboard, but subsequent models were very successful.

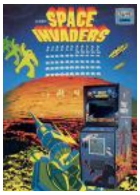
The **Atari 8-bit** family begins. A low-cost home computer, it also had a cartridge slot for games, making it a popular gateway into computing.

1975 1976 1977 1978 1979

Colossal Cave Adventure (also known as *ADVENT* or *Adventure*) is created by Will Crowther on a PDP-10 mainframe. The first adventure game ever, it also influenced RPGs, MUDs and Roguelikes.

The **Atari 2600** is released. By far the most successful early games console, it sold over 30 million units and popularized the use of ROM cartridges, allowing for an extensive game library.

VHS (Video Home System) began to be sold in the US, competing against Betamax and LaserDisk for the emerging home video market. VHS would win and remain dominant until the early 2000s.



Space Invaders is released. A seminal classic, it greatly popularized arcades and videogames in general. Its Atari 2600 port was also a hit, becoming the first game to sell over a million copies.

The **Intellivision** arrives. Created by toy giant Mattel, it brought in better graphics, licensed games and even a voice module. It was the Atari 2600's biggest rival, selling 3 million units.

Beneath Apple Manor

```
BENEATH
APPLE MANOR
BY DON WORTH
```

Don Worth, 1978
Apple II (PC Booter, Atari 8-bit)*

There are old games, and there are ancient games. *Beneath Apple Manor* is ancient. Arriving in 1978, it was the first, or one of the very first, RPG-like games for home computers. Yes, personal computing goes back that far.

It could run in as little as 16K RAM (tape version) or in 32K+ (disk version, which I had). Levels were created on the fly as you went deeper into the dungeon. Monsters were limited to five: green slime, ghost, troll, purple worm and red dragon. However, they increased in power the further down you went.

Each had its own type of nastiness. Slimes could dissolve armour. Trolls regenerated. Ghosts reduced your Strength permanently. Worms could kill you in one hit, as could Dragons, who had tough hides.

BAM could be customised, too. You chose the number of rooms per level (4–7, depending on RAM), the difficulty factor, and whether you wanted black-and-white or colour graphics. With colour, everything was a different coloured block.

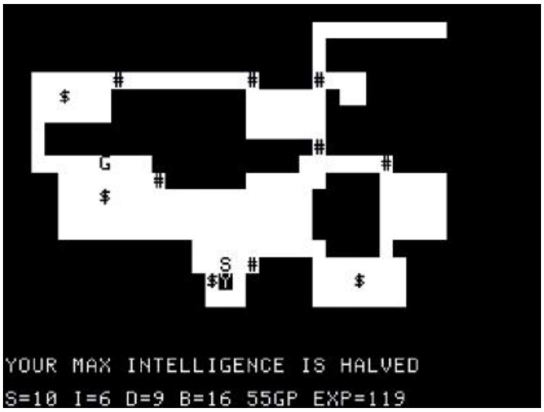
***_BAM_ was re-released in a Special Edition in 1982, with fancier graphics, multiple ports and the ability to save the game to play in multiple sessions.**

I much preferred the ASCII black-and-white, where the monsters (and player, too) were represented by letters and treasure by $.

You had four stats: Strength, Dexterity, Body and Intelligence. Fighting depleted Strength, so a breather after combat was necessary to restore it. Likewise, movement reduced Dexterity and spell-casting lowered Intelligence. Resting brought those back up, but only a Heal spell could restore hit points. This was not a game of fast movement and rapid-fire combat – caution was needed.

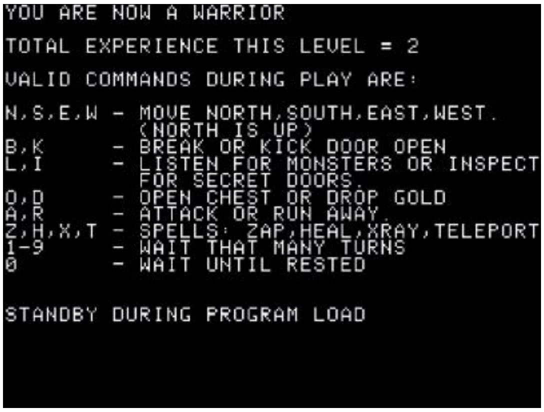
Experience was earned by killing monsters and bringing treasure back to the main staircase – the starting point of each level (it wasn't marked on the map, either, so you'd better remember its location).

There you traded points at 10 XP for 1 stat point, increasing it permanently. Gold could buy upgrades to weapons and armour. Most important of all, you could purchase a "brain scan". It was your character save.



```
YOUR MAX INTELLIGENCE IS HALVED
S=10 I=6 D=9 B=16 55GP EXP=119
```

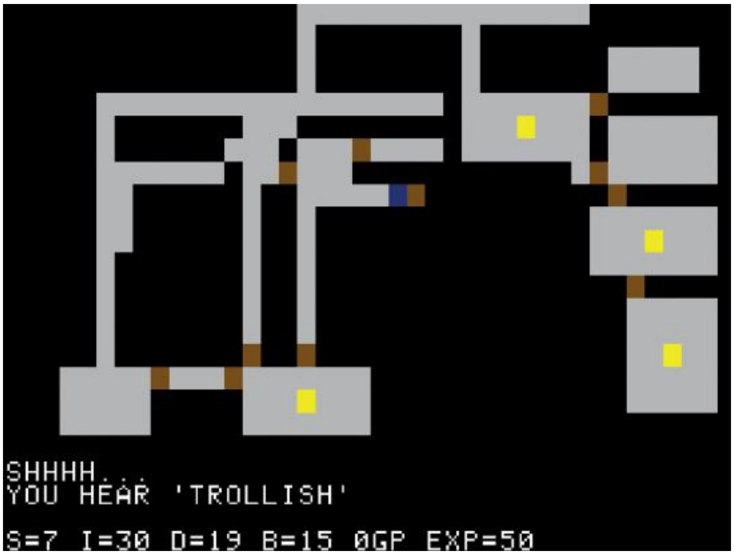
My character (Y) finds a treasure chest ($) while trying to run from a slime (S); the treasure is cursed



```
YOU ARE NOW A WARRIOR
TOTAL EXPERIENCE THIS LEVEL = 2
VALID COMMANDS DURING PLAY ARE:
N,S,E,W - MOVE NORTH,SOUTH,EAST,WEST.
          (NORTH IS UP)
B,K     - BREAK OR KICK DOOR OPEN
L,I     - LISTEN FOR MONSTERS OR INSPECT
          FOR SECRET DOORS.
O,D     - OPEN CHEST OR DROP GOLD
A,R     - ATTACK OR RUN AWAY.
Z,H,X,T - SPELLS: ZAP,HEAL,XRAY,TELEPORT
1-9     - WAIT THAT MANY TURNS
0       - WAIT UNTIL RESTED

STANDBY DURING PROGRAM LOAD
```

Commands are all over the keyboard, and each action depletes one of your attributes

> “It was released two years before *Rogue* came out. I was not influenced by *Rogue* (didn’t see it until something like 1983) and, so far as I know, the *Rogue* guys up at UC Berkeley hadn’t seen *BAM* either. We probably both came up with the same idea independently. But at least I can say *Rogue* is ‘*Beneath Apple Manor*-like’.”
>
> *– Don Worth,*
> Beneath Apple Manor*’s creator*



```
SHHHH...
YOU HEAR 'TROLLISH'

S=7 I=30 D=19 B=15 0GP EXP=50
```

Playing a huge dungeon floor in colour mode: we (the blue square) listen at a door, behind which a troll apparently lurks

Should you die – sooner or later, bound to happen – the scan restores you to life at the staircase. Of course, any money you had at the time is dropped. However, you are alive again, as at the last scan. And you’d want a new scan as soon as you could afford it. Each use reduced the stats of your next “reload” by 10%. Ouch! Too many restores of the same scan would leave you a wimp.

So you proceed carefully along the level, listening at doors, inspecting walls for secret doors, bashing stuck doors open, running when overmatched, and hoping you don’t run into too many wandering monsters.

All this had a goal: to find the fabled Golden Apple, rumoured to be in a dragon hoard far below the surface. Naturally, it exists, and there it is! Or is it? You know the saying: there can be only one (though not a ring this time).

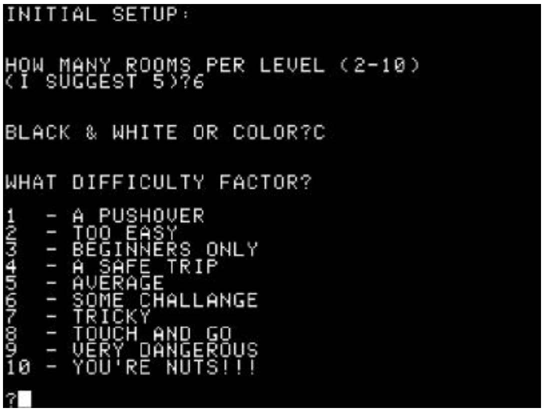
But each hoard had a supposed Apple; grab a fake, and you were soon reloading. How could you tell real from fake? Only – haha – by taking it. You don’t always need heavy combat to induce sweaty palms.

BAM had to be played entirely in one session. The brain scans were good only for the current game. Quit, and you’d have to start a new game next time. Still, it was meant as a “quick” play. At 5 rooms/levels, you could usually get through it in about four hours or so.

Thus *BAM* was a prototype for *Rogue* and its many variants. Sadly, it seems to have been overlooked in the history of this sub-genre, even though it arrived two years before *Rogue* itself showed up in 1980.

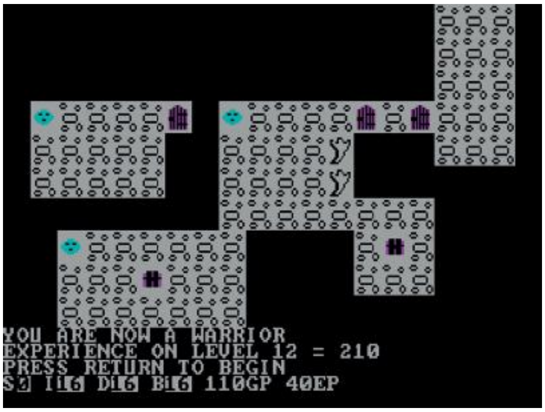
In its time, *Beneath Apple Manor* was a fun – if occasionally frustrating – diversion. While simple, the game required thought and strategy. And it shows what could be done with limited RAM and tight, well-designed code. **SC**

Some historians claim that BAM was the very first commercial computer game, sold in speciality stores inside a ziplock bag.



```
INITIAL SETUP:

HOW MANY ROOMS PER LEVEL (2-10)
(I SUGGEST 5)?6

BLACK & WHITE OR COLOR?C

WHAT DIFFICULTY FACTOR?

1  - A PUSHOVER
2  - TOO EASY
3  - BEGINNERS ONLY
4  - A SAFE TRIP
5  - AVERAGE
6  - SOME CHALLANGE
7  - TRICKY
8  - TOUCH AND GO
9  - VERY DANGEROUS
10 - YOU'RE NUTS!!!

?
```

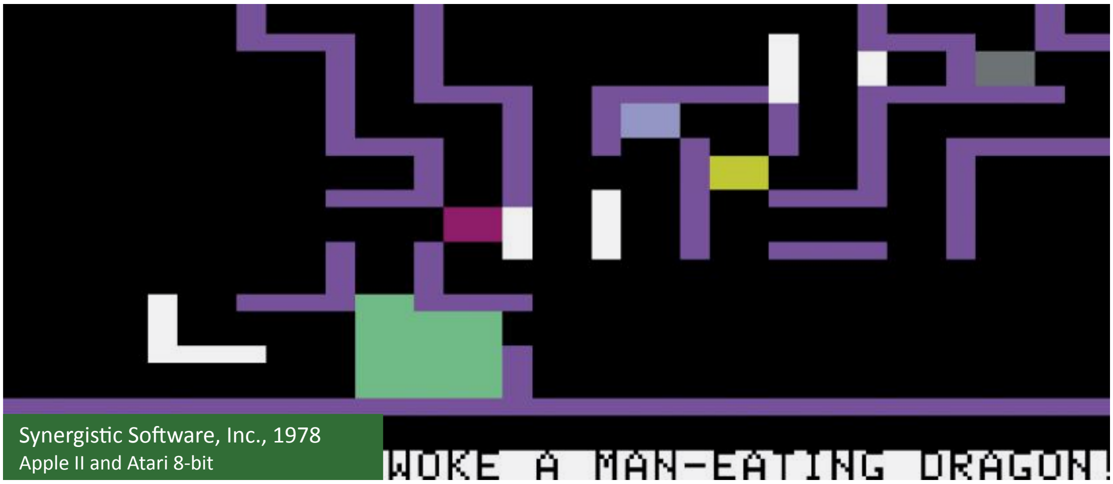
BAM allowed you to customise the sizes of the levels, and to choose between display modes and 10 difficulty settings



```
YOU ARE NOW A WARRIOR
EXPERIENCE ON LEVEL 12 = 210
PRESS RETURN TO BEGIN
S3 I16 D16 B16 110GP 40EP
```

Beneath Apple Manor: Special Edition added so-called “hi-res graphics”, but you could still play in ASCII mode

Dungeon Campaign



Synergistic Software, Inc., 1978
Apple II and Atari 8-bit

```
WOKE A MAN-EATING DRAGON!
```

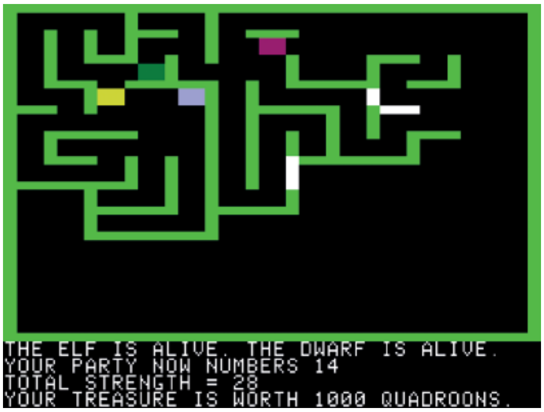
When talking about the first computer games of the ’70s, people often overlook the important role played by tech demos, guides and tech magazines. The Apple II, for example, came with a reference manual which explained how the entire computer worked and contained the BASIC source code of a few simple games to teach its users.

Synergistic Software was founded in 1978 by Robert Clardy and Ann Dickens Clardy. They would create several other games in the ’80s and ’90s, including *Spirit of Excalibur* and the *Diablo’s Hellfire* expansion.

One of these games was *Dragon Maze* (1978), by Gary J. Shannon, which randomly generated a simple top-down maze. The player had to navigate the maze by pressing U(p), D(own), L(eft) or R(ight), trying to escape before a dragon could catch them.

A series of codes that could be used to generate countless dungeons ready for exploration – this was a gold mine for any RPG fan, and Robert Clardy was one such fan. Inspired by *Dragon Maze,* he made his own dungeon-exploring game: *Dungeon Campaign*.

The game starts by generating four dungeon levels – a process that could take several minutes on the Apple II, giving time for players to try to map it down with pen and paper, if they so desired. Once it’s finished, you’re sent out to explore it.



```
THE ELF IS ALIVE. THE DWARF IS ALIVE.
YOUR PARTY NOW NUMBERS 14
TOTAL STRENGTH = 28
YOUR TREASURE IS WORTH 1000 QUADROONS.
```

My party is the pink square, treasures are yellow, enemies are dark green, stairs are white and the pits are grey

There’s no character generation; your party always starts with 15 nameless members, including one Elf and one Dwarf. This may sound weird today, but *Dungeons & Dragons* was a very different game back in 1978 – Elves and Dwarves didn’t have classes, and there was a focus on larger parties.

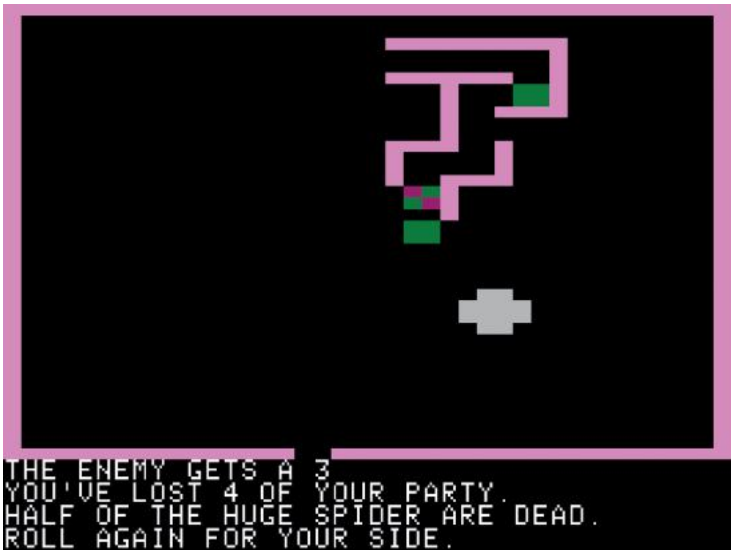
Each type of party member has a function. The Elf warns of immediate danger, such as a nearby trap or enemy, while the Dwarf maps the dungeon – if he dies, the map in the screen will no longer update as you explore. The rest of the party members serve as both your hit points and your strength – the game ends if they all die, but at each victory they increase their strength. This means your 15 warriors will have a strength of 15 at first, go to 30 after the first battle, to 45 after the second, but decrease to 42 if one party member dies. And die they will.

Combat is simplistic, you just roll your attack, which is added to your strength to see if you hit the enemy. Every enemy in the game dies with two hits; they just become harder to hit as you delve deeper. You also have to roll the enemy’s attack, and if they hit you’ll lose up to three party members.

The dungeon offers a few other perils, such as traps that will randomly send you to other levels, and rooms filled with toxic gas. Each of the four levels also has a guardian monster, which will run after the player and kill one or two party members if it reaches them. These have different behaviours – the giant snake on Level 3 moves in real time across the maze, while the spectre on Level 4 can pass through walls.

Regardless, *Dungeon Campaign* is an easy game. It’s also short. The goal is not to simply complete it, but to get a high score, collecting as much gold as possible before finishing the dungeon – a score-driven design that mirrors the popular arcade games of the era.

> "I had come from the paper *Dungeons & Dragons* world and anything that would roll the dice, keep track of the rules, do the maths, tally the results and describe the results was totally awesome. The dungeon master could now play, rather than just moderate. This was pretty cool, even if the graphics resolution was 40 × 40 pixels, with 4 lines of text below. Ugh. Hard to believe after playing *Halo* …"
>
> *– Robert Clardy,*
> Dungeon Campaign*'s creator*



```
THE ENEMY GETS A 3
YOU'VE LOST 4 OF YOUR PARTY.
HALF OF THE HUGE SPIDER ARE DEAD.
ROLL AGAIN FOR YOUR SIDE.
```

My party battles a pack of Spiders at the fourth dungeon floor (purple and green icon); the white icon is the spectre, which will kill one of my party members if it reaches me

After the simple yet satisfying fun of *Dungeon Campaign*, Robert Clardy would quickly produce three more games, constantly pushing the boundaries.

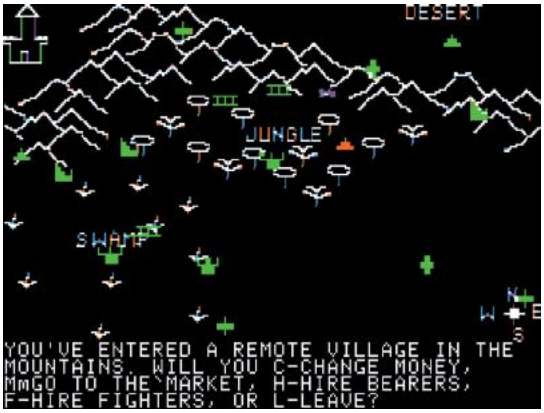
Released in 1979, *Wilderness Campaign* is a much more ambitious RPG. Here you explore a large outdoor area, fighting enemies and exploring ruins in search of treasure, then hiring more troops and buying equipment in villages – all in order to cross the map, reach the castle and defeat the evil necromancer.

Combat is still based around the number of party members, but now you can hire hundreds of mercenaries and buy better equipment. Some offer bonuses against special enemies, such as silver daggers against werewolves, while others are used when crossing rough terrain – a mountain might require a rope, while a jungle area might require a machete.

The game was followed by *Odyssey: The Compleat Apventure* (a play on Apple and Adventure), released in 1980. Even larger in scope, it's divided into segments. First you explore an island to gather resources, much as in *Wilderness Campaign*. Then you purchase a boat and sail across the sea, battling monsters, hunger and diseases in search of a magical orb. After finding it, you travel to the castle of a mighty wizard, solving a series of text-based challenges in order to rescue him.

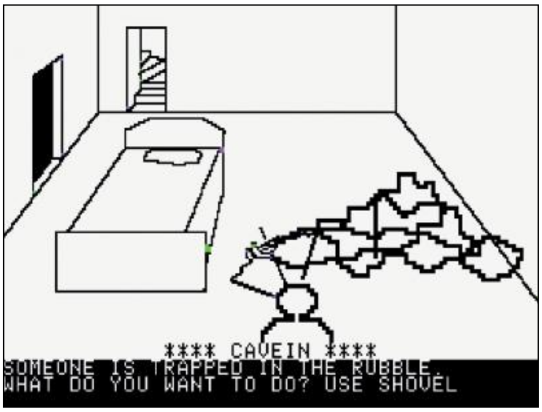
Robert Clardy's fourth game, *Apventure to Atlantis* (1982), continues where the previous one ends, but plays more like an adventure game, with less focus on stats and several puzzles that must be solved via a text-parser. Now playing as the new lord of the castle, you must defend yourself against invaders from Atlantis and find a way to stop them once and for all.

Almost 40 years later, these games look prehistoric and play nothing like what we now call RPGs. But that's exactly their appeal – unshackled by genre conventions, they tell whatever epic adventure they wish to tell, using whichever novel mechanics their creator had imagined. The computer is a tool for the Dungeon Master. **FE**



```
YOU'VE ENTERED A REMOTE VILLAGE IN THE
MOUNTAINS. WILL YOU C-CHANGE MONEY,
MmGO TO THE MARKET, H-HIRE BEARERS,
F-HIRE FIGHTERS, OR L-LEAVE?
```

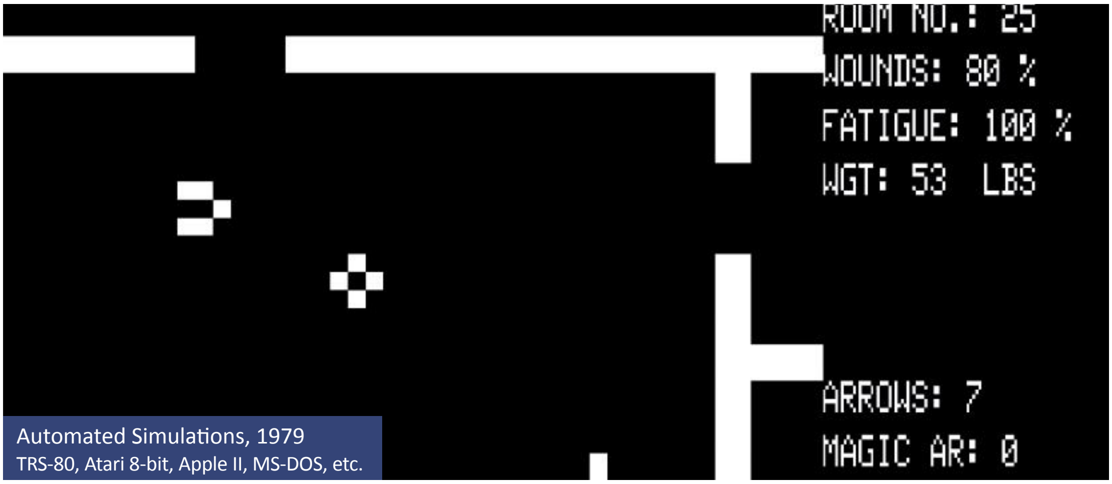
Wilderness Campaign's map is fixed, but points of interest are randomly placed, such as the town I'm at (purple icon)



```
**** CAVEIN ****
SOMEONE IS TRAPPED IN THE RUBBLE.
WHAT DO YOU WANT TO DO? USE SHOVEL
```

Apventure to Atlantis added elements from text adventure games, such as item puzzles, static images and a text-parser

Dunjonquest:
Temple of Apshai



```
ROOM NO.: 25
WOUNDS: 80 %
FATIGUE: 100 %
WGT: 53  LBS

ARROWS: 7
MAGIC AR: 0
```

Automated Simulations, 1979
TRS-80, Atari 8-bit, Apple II, MS-DOS, etc.

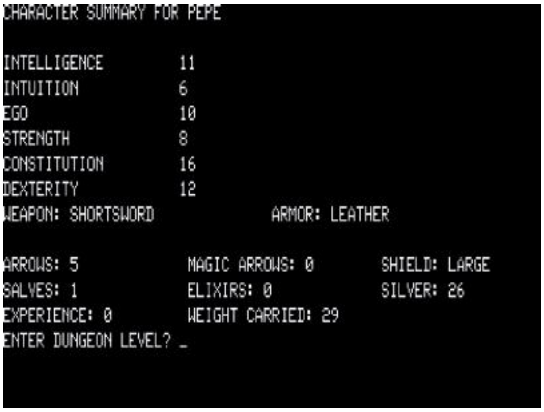
***Apshai's* engine was reused for over a dozen games. Automated Simulations' refusal to update its technology eventually made it lose markets to newer games and led to Jon Freeman leaving the company.**

Dungeons smell faintly of vanilla. This was one of many important life lessons I learned in my early adventuring days while descending into the depths of *Temple of Apshai*.

Conceived by avid dungeon master Jim Connelley and two of his *D&D* gaming friends, Jon Freeman and Jeff Johnson, *Temple of Apshai* was originally released to fulfil their desire for a "graphical adventure" game that required strategy and a little bit of luck to get by, as opposed to the text-only adventure games of the time (like *Colossal Cave* and *Zork*) that were imaginative but had static solutions.

It was the first in what would be called the *Dunjonquest* series. While rarely remembered today, the series spawned several games, sequels and add-ons, and was one of the best-selling early computer games, initially outselling both *Wizardry I* and *Ultima I*.

Although the blocky, black-and-white graphics of the TRS-80 received high praise back in 1979 (we didn't have much to compare with), the real secrets to the success of *Temple of Apshai* were its underlying strategy system, rich writing and sense of character.



```
CHARACTER SUMMARY FOR PEPE

INTELLIGENCE        11
INTUITION           6
EGO                 10
STRENGTH            8
CONSTITUTION        16
DEXTERITY           12
WEAPON: SHORTSWORD               ARMOR: LEATHER

ARROWS: 5           MAGIC ARROWS: 0        SHIELD: LARGE
SALVES: 1           ELIXIRS: 0             SILVER: 26
EXPERIENCE: 0       WEIGHT CARRIED: 29
ENTER DUNGEON LEVEL? _
```

Since you couldn't save into *Apshai*'s cassette tapes, every time the game starts you can roll a new character or type in the stats, gear and XP of a previous hero

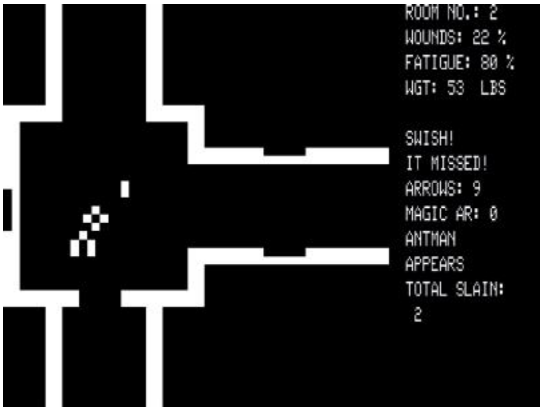
As in all good adventures, players begin at the inn, where they can customise their character stats (or let the Innkeeper roll the stat dice for them) and purchase equipment. Being inspired by *D&D*, the character sheet for *Apshai* used the same core stats and they could be freely edited – both so that players could import their characters from tabletop RPGs, and because it was not possible to save character data on the original TRS-80 cassette format.

Once sufficiently (or insufficiently) equipped, the adventure begins. The original dungeon, *Temple of Apshai*, is a forgotten temple consumed by wild overgrowth. It's chock-full of traps, secret doors and glittering gems, and inhabited by all manner of disgusting creatures – giant slimes, overgrown insects of all sorts, and various things that died some time ago but didn't have the decency to acknowledge it.

Released in 1981, *The Upper Reaches of Apshai* expansion added a new dungeon. A comic relief act, it takes place in the gardens and houses behind the inn. There are peculiar happenings in the vegetable garden for heroes to investigate, angry housewives and killer tomatoes to fight and, if you are lucky, a delicious pot of chicken soup or some ill-fitting laundry to find.

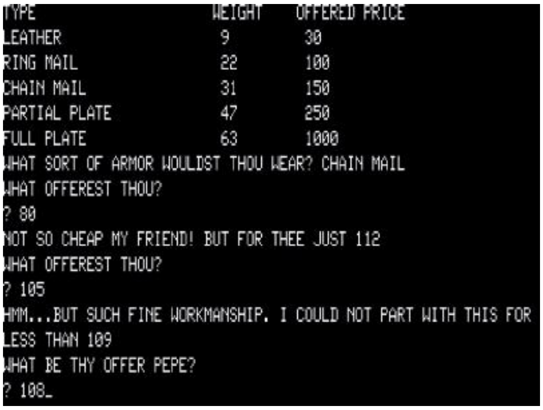
The second expansion, *Curse of Ra*, (1981) takes place in a cursed pyramid in the middle of a desert. Full of narrow, twisting hallways, traps at every step, and inconvenient slabs of stone that drop to block exits, in it heroes will square off against exotic foes like sphinxes, mummies and, worst of all, wild camels.

There are four levels for each dungeon, each one more difficult than the last, but players can choose which level to explore, in any order. There's no true ending; players can revisit the dungeons as often as they like and see it repopulated with monsters (both fixed and wandering) and treasure.



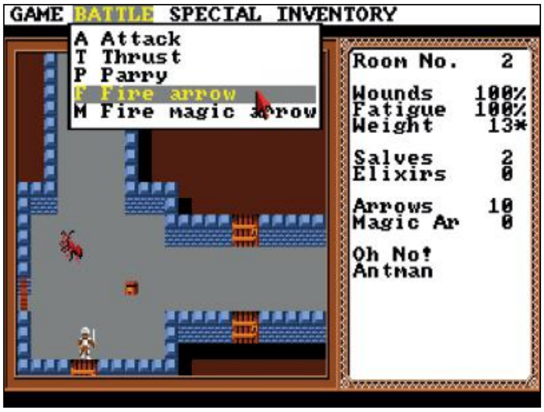
```
ROOM NO.: 2
WOUNDS: 22 %
FATIGUE: 80 %
WGT: 53  LBS

SWISH!
IT MISSED!
ARROWS: 9
MAGIC AR: 0
ANTMAN
APPEARS
TOTAL SLAIN:
 2
```

Apshai uses a simultaneous turn-based system: when you (the arrow) move or act, the enemy (the cross) acts as well.



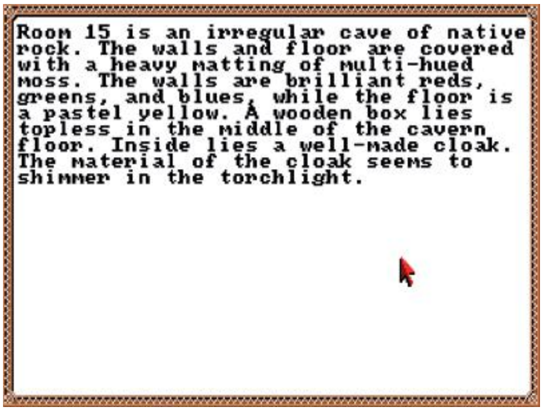
```
TYPE                    WEIGHT    OFFERED PRICE
LEATHER                 9         30
RING MAIL               22        100
CHAIN MAIL              31        150
PARTIAL PLATE           47        250
FULL PLATE              63        1000
WHAT SORT OF ARMOR WOULDST THOU WEAR? CHAIN MAIL
WHAT OFFEREST THOU?
? 80
NOT SO CHEAP MY FRIEND! BUT FOR THEE JUST 112
WHAT OFFEREST THOU?
? 105
HMM...BUT SUCH FINE WORKMANSHIP. I COULD NOT PART WITH THIS FOR
LESS THAN 109
WHAT BE THY OFFER PEPE?
? 108_
```

After creating a character you can purchase equipment from the Innkeeper – and might also haggle for cheaper prices



```
Room No.      2

Wounds     100%
Fatigue    100%
Weight      13*

Salves        2
Elixirs       0

Arrows       10
Magic Ar      0

Oh No!
Antman
```

The 1985 remake *Temple of Apshai Trilogy* contains all three dungeons and adds vastly improved graphics and UI



```
Room 15 is an irregular cave of native
rock. The walls and floor are covered
with a heavy matting of multi-hued
moss. The walls are brilliant reds,
greens, and blues, while the floor is
a pastel yellow. A wooden box lies
topless in the middle of the cavern
floor. Inside lies a well-made cloak.
The material of the cloak seems to
shimmer in the torchlight.
```

One of the remake's best features is displaying the room descriptions in-game, instead of referring you to the manual

When entering a room, players can search for traps and secret doors, grab treasure or put their ear to a door to listen for movement within the next room. With high enough Intelligence and Ego stats, an adventurer can even smooth-talk their way past deadly enemies. If diplomacy fails, combat kicks in.

Players have four methods of dispatching foes: a normal swing of the sword, a powerful thrust that can inflict great damage but also leaves a character more open to attack, a parry that favours defence over offence, and a bowshot to hit enemies at a distance, so long as arrows are to hand. The character's gear and experience also plays a role, and players have to be careful not to become so tired they can't act.

Setting the mood for all of this is the superb writing. Each room – 233 in *Temple of Apshai* and over 500 with the expansions – had a number that players could refer to in the game's excellent illustrated manual (clearly the work of tabletop enthusiasts) to find a description of the room they just entered. These descriptions, preferably read aloud in an ominous voice, truly gave the dungeons a sense of character.

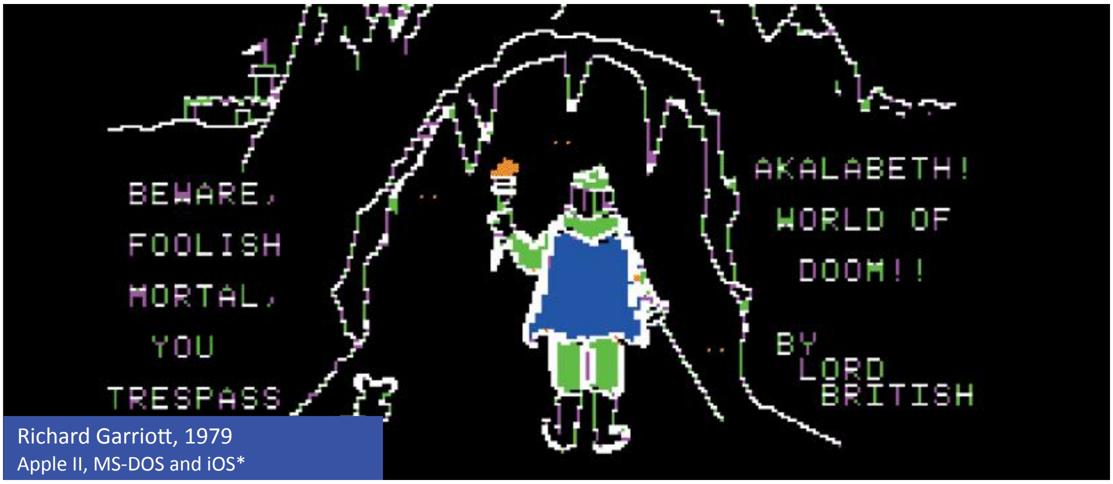
The vanilla-smelling caverns, the dim roaring sound that becomes louder as an adventurer treads in a certain direction, the "SPROINGGG!" of a crossbow trap that someone apparently forgot to load with a bolt – these descriptions give players an environment in which to tell their own stories, and make the plain graphics pop with imagined detail.

Besides mood setting, the room descriptions also provide subtle clues as to where players could find secret doors, traps, treasures or monsters. See some scratch marks on the floor near the East wall? Good chances of finding a secret door there. Skeleton on the floor? Don't turn your back on it; it probably feels fine. See some laundry hung out to dry? Steel yourself for the wrath of an angry housewife.

Thanks to the evocative writing and the strategic combat system, the *Temple of Apshai* is a timeless classic that still retains its replay value today. Even if one had the map of every dungeon memorised, reading the room descriptions is like going back to a favourite novel, and surviving combat is never a sure thing, even for veterans. **JY**

***Temple of Apshai* was followed by a series of "MicroQuests", very short and simple *Dunjonquest* titles that featured more arcade elements. The "real" sequel was *Hellfire Warrior* (1980), which improved the mechanics and even got two expansions, but was never as popular as the original game.**

Akalabeth:
World of Doom



Richard Garriott, 1979
Apple II, MS-DOS and iOS*

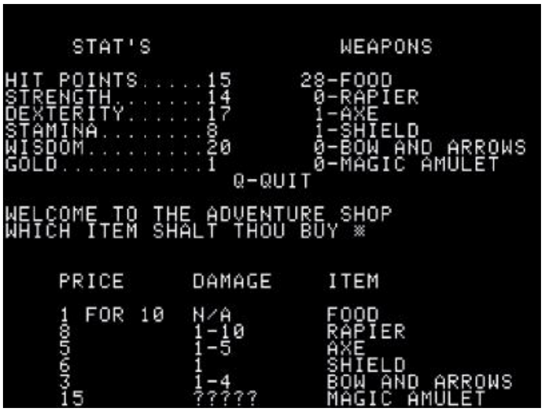
***Akalabeth* can be downloaded for free on GOG, and in 2011 an iOS version was released on the App Store.*

It wouldn't be an overstatement to say that Richard Garriott is one of the most important people to ever make their stamp on gaming. Starting off as a solo programmer, his endeavours would quickly propel him into the position of one of the most famous and recognised figures in the industry.

The *Ultima* games, the founding of Origin Systems, even his alter ego ("Lord British"): Garriott is directly responsible for several of gaming's earliest icons.

Everyone has to start somewhere though, and for Garriott that starting point was *Dungeons & Dragons*. An avid player, the adventures he ran with his friends served as inspiration for another of his high school hobbies: programming computer games. Working on his school's primitive teletype machine, the teenage Garriott created a simple game that he dubbed *D&D*. Eventually, he had progressed through so many iterations that *D&D* had become *D&D #28*.

Then, in 1979, he made it commercial. He rewrote the game for the Apple II, renamed it *Akalabeth: World of Doom* and sold it in ziplock bags with photocopied instructions and a cover illustration by his mother.



```
      STAT'S                   WEAPONS

HIT POINTS.....15         28-FOOD
STRENGTH.......14          0-RAPIER
DEXTERITY......17          1-AXE
STAMINA........8           1-SHIELD
WISDOM.........20          0-BOW AND ARROWS
GOLD...........1           0-MAGIC AMULET
                 Q-QUIT
WELCOME TO THE ADVENTURE SHOP
WHICH ITEM SHALT THOU BUY

   PRICE        DAMAGE      ITEM

   1 FOR 10     N/A         FOOD
   8            1-10        RAPIER
   5            1-5         AXE
   6            1           SHIELD
   3            1-4         BOW AND ARROWS
   15           ?????       MAGIC AMULET
```

There are only six items in the game: Food is vital to survive, the Axe and Shield are basic equipment, the Bow and Rapier are exclusive to the Fighter, and only the Mage can use the Magic Amulet

This original release would find its way into the hands of the California Pacific Computer Company, who offered to publish the game on a wider scale. It became a hit for the young developer, providing the profits he needed to lay the foundation for the legacy that followed.

Sadly, for all it helped to foment, the game itself has not aged well. You're tasked by Lord British with proving yourself worthy of being a knight in the royal court. While there have certainly been adventures that launched on less, *Akalabeth* never grows beyond this bare-bones plot.

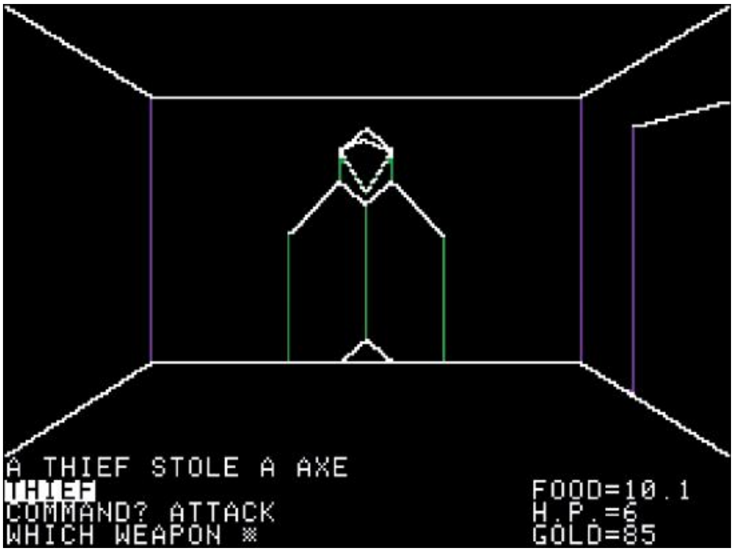
All it amounts to is entering a dungeon, killing a specific monster and then reporting back to Lord British so he can tell you to kill another one that's even tougher. Do this a few times and you win.

This on its own isn't necessarily a deal-breaker. In fact, none of the CRPGs that came before had any goals besides gathering treasures, so it's already an evolution of sorts. Unfortunately, *Akalabeth*'s gameplay is just too thin to stand on its own.

As you start, the game lets you pick a "lucky number", which serves as seed for its randomly generated overworld. Regardless of what number you pick, though, the worlds it creates are universally dull. The towns you visit have no real NPCs and you won't encounter any monsters outside its dungeons.

Character creation and development is almost non-existent. Your stats are rolled randomly and your one big choice, between playing a Fighter or a Mage, is mostly just picking between more weapons options or being able to use the Magic Amulet, which holds a few magic spells. While combat can involve some strategy, you'll often just press the attack button until someone dies. *Akalabeth* is the CRPG genre boiled down to its most rudimentary parts.

> "*Akalabeth* was not made to be published. I made it merely for myself and my friends. It was John Mayer, the manager of the Computerland store where I had a summer job, who encouraged me to spend the large sum (in those days for a high school senior) of $200 to 'publish' it on the store wall."
>
> *– Richard Garriott,* Akalabeth*'s creator*



```
A THIEF STOLE A AXE
THIEF
COMMAND? ATTACK                FOOD=10.1
WHICH WEAPON ※                 H.P.=6
                               GOLD=85
```

Dungeons are random and explored in first-person view; combat is turn-based and very simple, but enemies like the Thief can steal your weapons and food, leaving you defenceless

That's not to say there's no charm or fun to be had. In its best moments, *Akalabeth* almost feels like a simple Roguelike. Death can come quickly, and it can genuinely be fun to see how long you can last before you're killed. Even this experience, however, is derailed by the game's punishing approach to food.

Food, even more than hit points, is life in *Akalabeth*. Your character eats a ton of it and there's no leeway – if the food counter reaches zero, you starve to death instantly. This would be fine if it were easier to plan ahead. Unfortunately, the random dungeon and town locations can make it hard to determine how much you'll need to find your next destination.

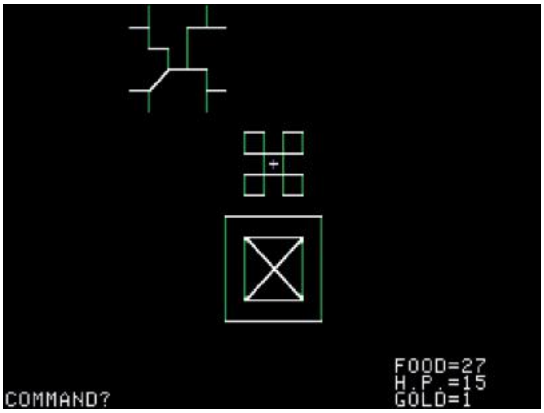
Dungeon layouts are likewise random and it's easy to get lost in their wire-frame corridors. If you start off as a Mage, you can use the Magic Amulet to transport yourself outside safely. If you're a Fighter, however, you'll have no choice but to trek all the way back out, scoffing down food with every step.

Nine times out of ten, this will be what kills you. Worse than that though, it kills the fun. Play sessions typically aren't long, but it's still frustrating when you starve to death before even reaching the first dungeon. I started giving up and restarting the second my food supply began to run low.

None of this should be taken to mean that *Akalabeth*'s not worth trying. It just means that you need to approach it with the proper mindset. If you start up *Akalabeth* intent on enjoying some good old-fashioned CRPG fun, you're probably going to be disappointed. There are just too many other titles that do what it does better.

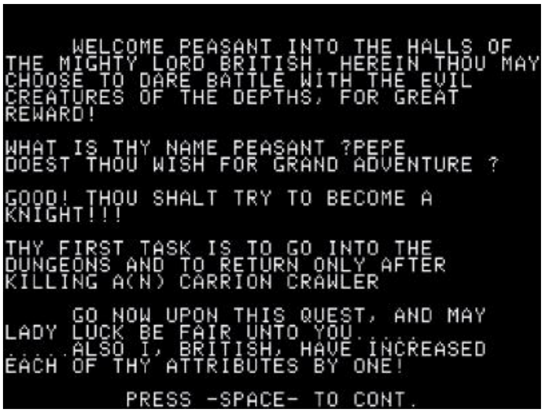
Akalabeth feels best if you view it as a museum piece. It's *Ultima* in the infant stage; the birthplace of now-traditional CRPG elements like the overworld map and the quest-based progression, as well as Richard Garriott's testing ground for the ideas that would make the *Ultima* games great. **STS**

The name *Akalabeth* comes from Akallabêth, one of the chapters in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Silmarillion*. Another Tolkien reference is that the final enemy you must hunt is always a Balrog.



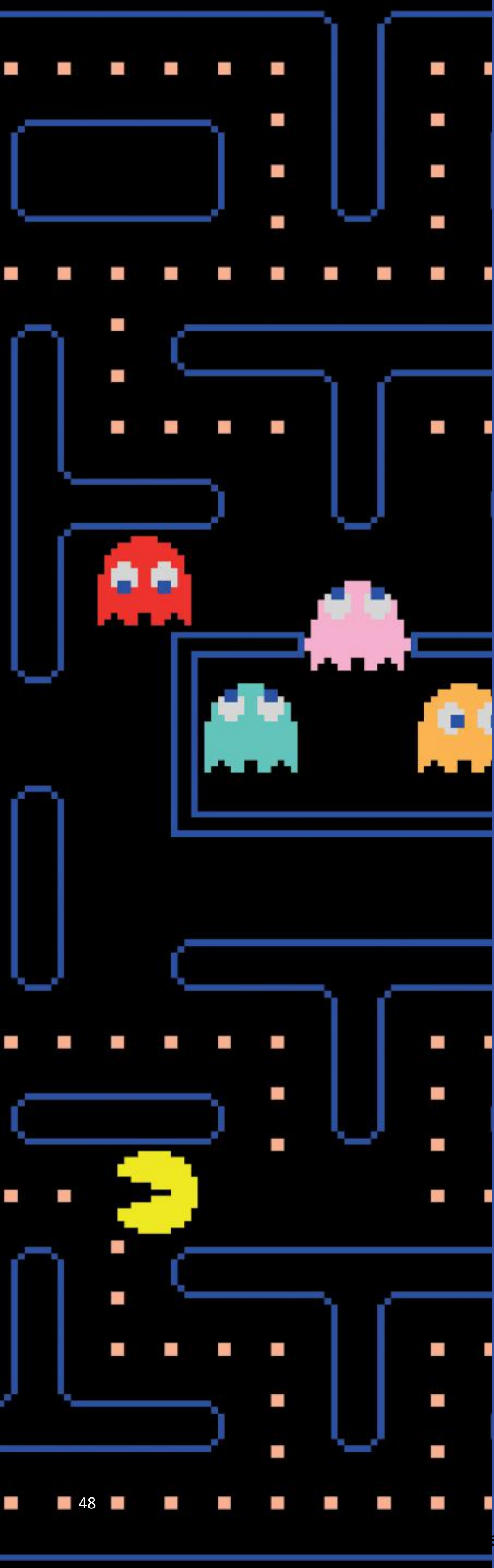
```
                         FOOD=27
                         H.P.=15
COMMAND?                 GOLD=1
```

Akalabeth was the first CRPG with an overworld map; here you can see a castle, a nearby town and a mountain



```
    WELCOME PEASANT INTO THE HALLS OF
THE MIGHTY LORD BRITISH. HEREIN THOU MAY
CHOOSE TO DARE BATTLE WITH THE EVIL
CREATURES OF THE DEPTHS, FOR GREAT
REWARD!

WHAT IS THY NAME PEASANT ?PEPE
DOEST THOU WISH FOR GRAND ADVENTURE ?

GOOD! THOU SHALT TRY TO BECOME A
KNIGHT!!!

THY FIRST TASK IS TO GO INTO THE
DUNGEONS AND TO RETURN ONLY AFTER
KILLING A(N) CARRION CRAWLER

    GO NOW UPON THIS QUEST, AND MAY
LADY LUCK BE FAIR UNTO YOU.....
.....ALSO I, BRITISH, HAVE INCREASED
EACH OF THY ATTRIBUTES BY ONE!

       PRESS -SPACE- TO CONT.
```

Each time you hunt and kill the monster that Lord British asks you to, he'll raise your stats and present a new quest



1980-1984: The boom, the clones and the crash

The entire tech industry radically changed in the early ’80s, starting with the arrival of IBM in the home computer market.

An established tech giant that dominated mainframe computers, its IBM Personal Computer (or IBM PC) forced the home computer segment to professionalise. While Apple discouraged third-party developers, IBM shared all information and had an open architecture. Empowered by the company’s legendary reputation and a powerful marketing campaign, IBM PCs quickly dethroned Apple and became the leading standard, with an extensive catalogue of software and components.

But these were still costly, high-end products. Vital in popularising home computers were new low-end machines like the Commodore 64, ZX Spectrum and the MSX line. Costing a fraction of the price of an Apple II or IBM PC, they plugged into common TVs (instead of expensive monitors), were promoted as educational tools in schools (especially in the UK) and were also great for gaming, introducing a whole new generation to computers.

Meanwhile, the console market had become free-for-all mayhem. Fuelled by the success of the Atari 2600, several companies decided to jump on the bandwagon and make their own consoles, with over a dozen console models now competing side-by-side on store shelves.

Countless companies also followed Activision, becoming third-party developers and publishing their own games. Most were of terrible quality or cheap copies of popular titles. Atari itself also had poor standards, with failures like its crude port of *Pac-Man* and the infamous *E.T.* game.

Still, profit was at a record high and companies and retailers kept betting on ever-increasing sales for the holidays of 1982. However, customers got so burnt out that they stopped buying. Left with massive dead stocks and no way to recover their investments, the US market crashed in 1983.

What had been a $3 billion business in 1982 barely made $100 million in 1985. Video games went from prized products directly to bargain bin fodder, and the US console industry was for all practical purposes dead. The crisis also affected US arcades, since many companies were active in both markets.

However, computers were eager to satisfy those hungry for more. No longer curiosities sold in ziplock bags, computer games started to professionalise, with hundreds of game developers emerging across the world. Famous companies like EA, Interplay, Origin, Ubisoft, Infocom, Brøderbund, SSI, Microprose, Psygnosis, Virgin Interactive, Infogrames, Sierra On-line and Soft-World were all founded around this time.

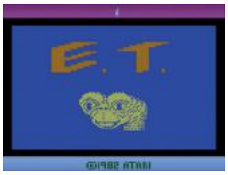
Meanwhile, in Japan, an odd coincidence occurred. On the same day – 15 July 1983 – two companies released their first consoles: the Nintendo Famicom and the SEGA SG-1000. It was a sign of things to come.

Trends:

IBM PC-Compatibles: Computers like the Apple II and Commodore PET had closed, proprietary architectures, but the IBM PC was produced with off-the-shelf components – only its BIOS was copyrighted. This allowed companies like Compaq to produce their own, cheaper machines that could still run IBM's software – the famous IBM PC-Compatibles, or PC Clones. They would be extremely popular and help IBM attain market dominance, but years later the clones would actually overthrow IBM.

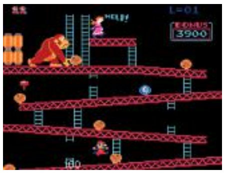
Released in 1983, the Compaq Portable was the first 100% Compatible PC Clone, created by reverse-engineering IBM's BIOS

The 1983 US Video Game Crash: Video games were an icon of the digital revolution that began in the mid-'70s, with the Atari as its poster boy. Its massive success led to a gold rush, with even companies like Johnson & Johnson making games for a quick profit. When the bubble burst and the market collapsed, the console industry in North America went with it. Meanwhile, others thrived: across the world computer games would enter a golden age, while Japan would start its console dominance with Nintendo's Famicom/NES.



Atari 2600's *E.T.* cost millions in licence fees but got only five weeks of development time. A terrible game, its catastrophic failure is an icon of the crash

The Golden Age of Arcades: The release of *Space Invaders* in 1978 led arcades to the height of their popularity. Hits like *Asteroids, Donkey Kong, Defender*, *Mr. Do!* and *Centipede* were making millions – 1980's *Pac-Man* alone sold over 400,000 machines worldwide, becoming a pop culture icon with an extensive line of merchandise and even a TV show. But it wouldn't last long – arcades were soon crushed by the NES, only briefly resurging in the late '80s/early '90s thanks to beat-'em-up, racing and fighting games.



Donkey Kong (1981) was one of the biggest arcade hits, with over 60,000 machines spread across the world

ON-LINE
Mystery House

Mystery House is released. Roberta Williams and Sierra's first game, it added graphics to previously text-only adventure games, redefining the genre.

The first **IBM PC** is released. A massive success, it would destroy Apple's dominance and pave the way for the IBM PC-Compatibles.

The **ZX Spectrum** is released. A British rival to the Commodore 64, it greatly popularised computers in Europe and South America.

The **Commodore 64** is released. The "Ford Model T of home computers", it was hugely popular and dominated the low-end market for years.

The **Amstrad CPC** line begins. A popular all-in-one computer, it came with a colour monitor and tape recorder, yet was still relatively cheap.

1980 | 1981 | 1982 | 1983 | 1984

GAME & WATCH
BALL

Nintendo's **Game & Watch** series begins. An LCD clock with a single game, it had several models and inspired the Game Boy. In 1982 the *Donkey Kong* Game and Watch also introduced the D-Pad.

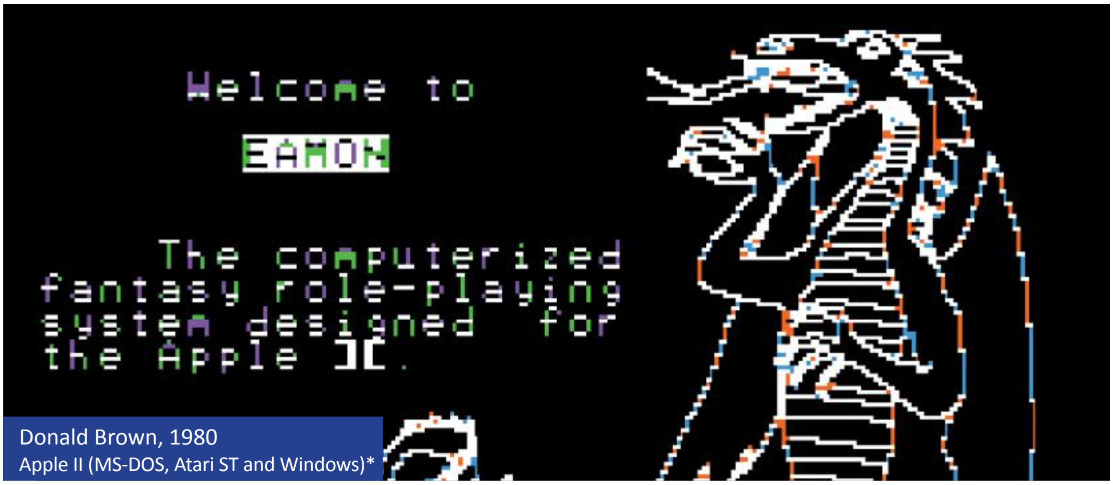
MS-DOS is released. Developed by Microsoft for the IBM PC, it was also sold separately, being used in all IBM PC-Compatibles. It would remain popular until the late '90s.

3½-inch floppy disks begin to be sold. Initially 360KB in size, they could hold up to 1.44MB by 1986. They replaced cassette tapes and 5¼-inch floppies, remaining popular until the early 2000s.

The **MSX** was an attempt to create a new industry standard. Designed by Microsoft and several Japanese companies, it was popular in Asia, Europe, the Middle East and South America until the '90s.

The **Apple Macintosh** popularised mice, graphical interfaces and more, but was expensive and failed to compete with the IBM PC, leading to Steve Jobs being fired from Apple.

Eamon



```
        Welcome to

          EAMON

      The computerized
fantasy role-playing
system designed  for
the Apple ][.
```

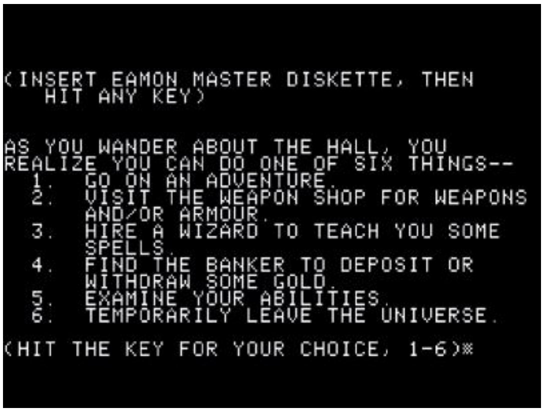
Donald Brown, 1980
Apple II (MS-DOS, Atari ST and Windows)*

You walk into the Adventurer's Guild, register your name and abilities, then buy a weapon and a piece of armour. After asking the nearby wizard to teach you some spells, you enter a hall lined with doors – each leading to a different adventure, in a different setting, written by a different person. Welcome to *Eamon*.

Eamon isn't just one game; it is a game system – a set of rules and tools for creating more games. Initially circulating by word of mouth, it became popular via *Recreational Computing*, an American computer magazine. Their July 1980 issue was entirely dedicated to "fantasy games", with articles about how to create such games, their future as a genre and also a few games, such as *Eamon* and *Wizard's Castle*, with their authors explaining how they work and the next few pages containing the game's entire BASIC code.

Readers would type the code into their computers and then save it on a tape or disk in order to play. This was a cheap way to distribute games before the Internet, but also an invaluable resource in helping aspiring programmers learn from each other's code.

***Eamon* was ported by fans to other platforms, including several different versions for MS-DOS. If you want to give the game a try, there's also a handy browser version.**



```
(INSERT EAMON MASTER DISKETTE, THEN
   HIT ANY KEY)

AS YOU WANDER ABOUT THE HALL, YOU
REALIZE YOU CAN DO ONE OF SIX THINGS--
  1.    GO ON AN ADVENTURE.
  2.    VISIT THE WEAPON SHOP FOR WEAPONS
        AND/OR ARMOUR.
  3.    HIRE A WIZARD TO TEACH YOU SOME
        SPELLS.
  4.    FIND THE BANKER TO DEPOSIT OR
        WITHDRAW SOME GOLD.
  5.    EXAMINE YOUR ABILITIES.
  6.    TEMPORARILY LEAVE THE UNIVERSE.
(HIT THE KEY FOR YOUR CHOICE, 1-6)
```

The Main Hall, where your characters are created and come to rest between adventures; the shops offer only a few items, so you'll need to go out exploring to find the cool stuff

Created by Donald Brown, *Eamon*'s heart is its "Main Hall" program, used to create your character and load adventures. You simply type a name and the game will generate a character based on three stats: Hardiness, which determines HP and carry weight; Agility, used in combat and when activating traps; and Charisma, which controls how friendly NPCs are (mostly if they'll attack you or not) and store prices.

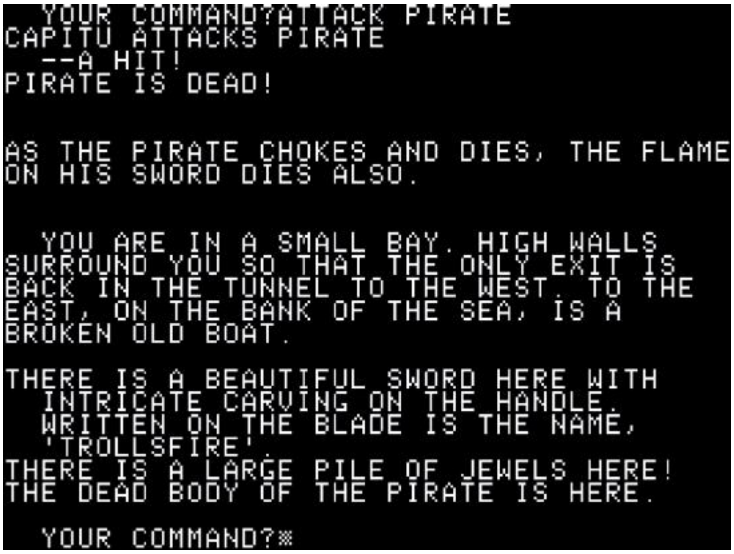
You buy weapons and armour at the store, as well as spells from the wizard. There are five weapon types, three armour categories and four spells – Heal, Blast, Speed and Power – which heal, deal damage, boost Agility and ask the gods for a favour, respectively.

The Main Hall also includes a sample adventure called Beginner's Cave, and it's a good taste of what *Eamon* is. It plays much like text adventures such as *Colossal Cave* (1976): the game gives a description of the room you're currently in and you act by typing commands, such as NORTH (or N) to head north, GET SWORD to grab a sword on the ground, etc. *Eamon's* novelty was introducing RPG elements, with combat being based on die-rolls & stats, plus having weapon skills slowly increase as you use them.

After finishing an adventure, you will be returned to the Main Hall (if you survive) and can then bring your newly-acquired weapons and skills to hundreds of other adventures, all created by other players using *Eamon*'s Dungeon Designer Diskette.

This means you can take the magical sword at the end of the Beginner's Cave into a space adventure, use it to stop an alien invasion and then bring your newly acquired blaster rifle to Ancient Greece to battle the Minotaur – or any other adventure whose disk you managed to get at college or at work, trade by mail or create yourself. Remember, this was long before the Internet, or even BBSs, became popular!

> "Unlike most games, there is no clear single goal in a fantasy role-playing game. Instead, you are directing the actions of a character to achieve the goals you want him/her to achieve. Although most people accept normal goals such as 'make lots of money' or 'become a feared warrior', you can choose any yardstick you want to measure your success. After all, it's your life – you ARE the character."
>
> – *Donald Brown,*
> Eamon*'s creator*



```
  YOUR COMMAND?ATTACK PIRATE
CAPITU ATTACKS PIRATE
  --A HIT!
PIRATE IS DEAD!

AS THE PIRATE CHOKES AND DIES, THE FLAME
ON HIS SWORD DIES ALSO.

  YOU ARE IN A SMALL BAY. HIGH WALLS
SURROUND YOU SO THAT THE ONLY EXIT IS
BACK IN THE TUNNEL TO THE WEST.  TO THE
EAST, ON THE BANK OF THE SEA, IS A
BROKEN OLD BOAT.

THERE IS A BEAUTIFUL SWORD HERE WITH
  INTRICATE CARVING ON THE HANDLE.
  WRITTEN ON THE BLADE IS THE NAME,
  'TROLLSFIRE'.
THERE IS A LARGE PILE OF JEWELS HERE!
THE DEAD BODY OF THE PIRATE IS HERE.

  YOUR COMMAND?▒
```

I kill the last enemy of the Beginner's Cave and he drops his magical sword, which I'll carry to new adventures; its special power is to produce fire, which can be used to solve puzzles in this adventure

Seeing the game's success, Donald Brown created *SwordThrust* (1981), a sequel to *Eamon*, this time as a commercial product. Despite several improvements, such as a better interface and more spells, it was never as popular and had few adventures made for it, resulting in Brown abandoning game development.

The free, public domain nature of *Eamon* had made it spread across the US and, with Brown leaving *Eamon* behind, the community rose to the challenge of keeping the game alive. Programmer John Nelson hacked the system to allow for more complex designs and in 1984 founded the National Eamon Users Club, an association that catalogued *Eamon* adventures and published a newsletter with reviews and design tips.

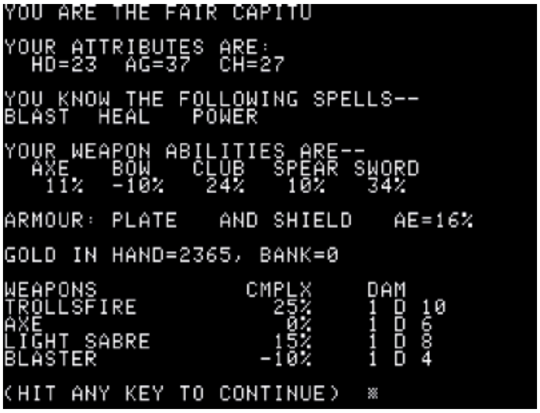
In 1988 the club became The Eamon Adventurer's Guild, helmed by Thomas Zuchowski, and it can still be found at www.eamonag.org. Its records contain 256 adventures, most created between 1984 and 1994, but sadly it stopped being updated in 2005.

Today it's easy to download these adventures and enjoy how diverse they are. You might be a pirate, a cop or a time-traveller, delve into Moria, hunt hackers, fight cyborgs, explore the inside of the Death Star, or even play as Batman pursuing the Joker.

Of course, the problem with having a game entirely based on user-generated content is that the quality varies wildly. Some games are creative and well-designed, while others suffer from poor writing, cheap deaths, obtuse puzzles and tiresome combat. The *Star Wars* adventure listed above sounds cool, but it's filled with endless battles against stormtroopers.

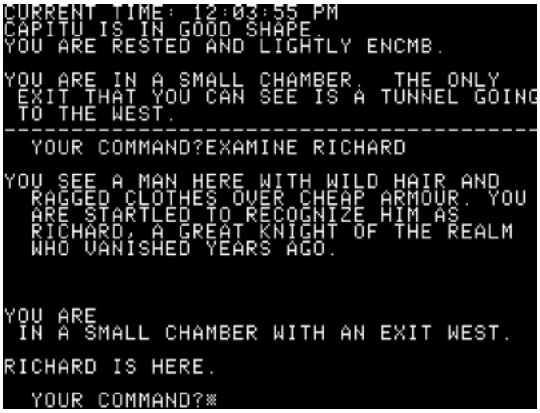
Yet, I finished it. Mostly because I really wanted to bring a lightsaber with me. Mind you, the lightsaber functions like any other sword, and it was actually weaker than the weapons I had. The only thing special about it was its name. But this incredible power that words have to feed our imagination is precisely why *Eamon* conquered so many fans. **FE**

The Eamon Adventurer's Guild produced a CD which comes with 242 public-domain adventures, maps, guides, all their newsletters and some emulators.



```
YOU ARE THE FAIR CAPITU

YOUR ATTRIBUTES ARE:
  HD=23  AG=37  CH=27

YOU KNOW THE FOLLOWING SPELLS--
BLAST  HEAL   POWER

YOUR WEAPON ABILITIES ARE--
  AXE   BOW   CLUB  SPEAR SWORD
   11%  -10%   24%   10%   34%

ARMOUR: PLATE   AND SHIELD   AE=16%

GOLD IN HAND=2365, BANK=0

WEAPONS             CMPLX    DAM
TROLLSFIRE            25%    1 D 10
AXE                    0%    1 D 6
LIGHT SABRE           15%    1 D 8
BLASTER              -10%    1 D 4

(HIT ANY KEY TO CONTINUE)  ▒
```

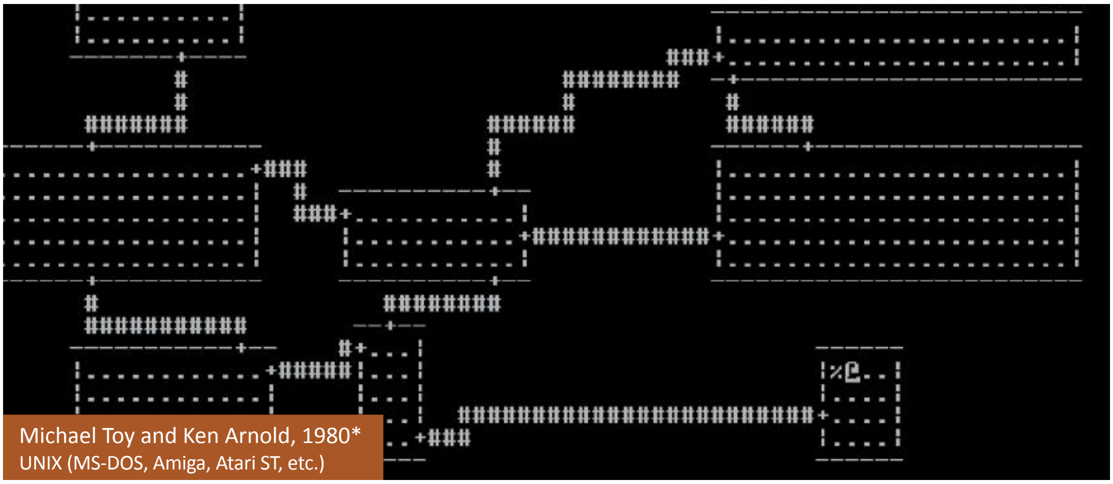
The status screen showing stats, gear and skills – don't get too attached, as weapons break and character death is permanent!



```
CURRENT TIME: 12:03:55 PM
CAPITU IS IN GOOD SHAPE.
YOU ARE RESTED AND LIGHTLY ENCMB.

YOU ARE IN A SMALL CHAMBER.  THE ONLY
 EXIT THAT YOU CAN SEE IS A TUNNEL GOING
 TO THE WEST.
----------------------------------------
  YOUR COMMAND?EXAMINE RICHARD

YOU SEE A MAN HERE WITH WILD HAIR AND
  RAGGED CLOTHES OVER CHEAP ARMOUR. YOU
  ARE STARTLED TO RECOGNIZE HIM AS
  RICHARD, A GREAT KNIGHT OF THE REALM
  WHO VANISHED YEARS AGO.


YOU ARE
 IN A SMALL CHAMBER WITH AN EXIT WEST.

RICHARD IS HERE.

  YOUR COMMAND?▒
```

SwordThrust introduced several improvements, such as a status window on top, but was never as popular as *Eamon*

Rogue



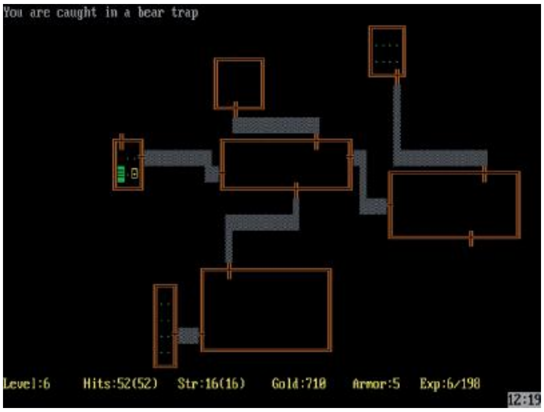
Michael Toy and Ken Arnold, 1980*
UNIX (MS-DOS, Amiga, Atari ST, etc.)

Rogue gave the Roguelike sub-genre its name. It was inspired by popular text-based adventure games like *Colossal Cave Adventure* (1976), but where adventure games emphasised world-building, hand-crafted puzzles and story, *Rogue*'s primary goal was replayability: its elements would be randomised between each playthrough, producing a new experience every time. *Rogue*'s objective is straightforward: descend into a dungeon to find the Amulet of Yendor and bring it back to the surface – without dying!

The game was developed by Michael Toy and Glen Wichman, with later input from Ken Arnold at Berkley's University of California. Created using the university's Unix terminal, *Rogue* became so popular it was included on the Berkeley Software Distribution (BSD), an open-source operating system, spreading to other campuses.

Excited by the game's renown, the developers founded a company, A.I. Design, and made a deal with Epyx to publish it as a commercial title. But it was too late. People had already embraced *Rogue* as a public domain game, creating and sharing their own "*Rogue*-likes", spawning an entire sub-genre.

***_Rogue_ first appeared on Unix terminals in 1980. It was then ported to MS-DOS by A.I. Design in 1984 and published by Epyx in 1985 for several platforms.**



```
You are caught in a bear trap

Level:6    Hits:52(52)   Str:16(16)    Gold:710    Armor:5   Exp:6/190
                                                                   12:19
```

Monsters respawn constantly, but you'll also have to deal with traps and hidden passages

I spent years banging my head against the ludicrous complexity and idiosyncratic mechanics of Roguelikes like *NetHack*, *ADOM* and *Angband* before I got around to playing *Rogue*. I was a little surprised at the simplicity of its design: there's no character creation to speak of. You name your rogue and the game plops you down on the first floor of the dungeon.

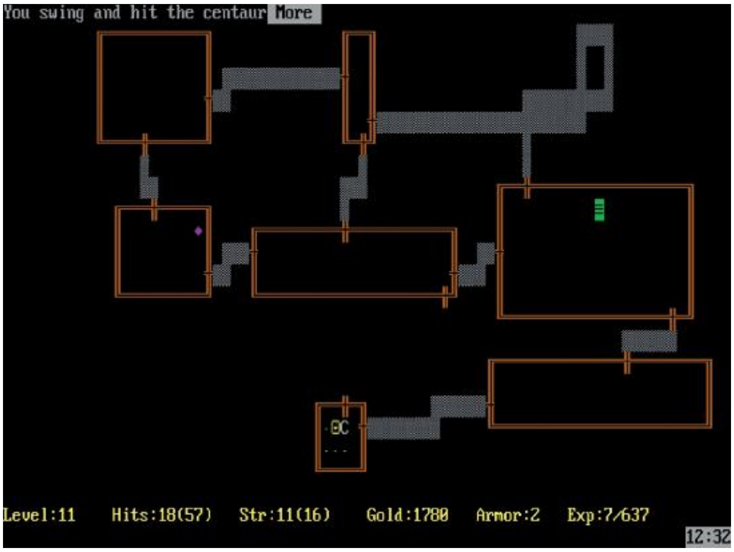
The dungeon design is also relatively simplistic. Each floor is composed of a 3 × 3 grid of rooms. The only thing that changes in the layout is the presence or absence of a room, how the corridors connect the rooms, and the shapes of the rooms. On later levels, the hallways may become more complex and difficult to navigate, and some rooms may be dark, limiting the player's field of vision. There is only one stairway down on each level. You cannot go back to previous levels until you retrieve the Amulet of Yendor.

As a result, the structure of *Rogue* is more linear than something like *NetHack*, but that also makes it far more accessible: the moment-to-moment decisions a player needs to make are leaner, more focused.

This isn't to say that *Rogue* doesn't have a lot of compelling depth to it. As with most other Roguelikes, it features potions, wands, staves, rings and scrolls – all of which have random effects that must be identified by experimenting with them. Figuring out different strategies to mitigate the risk involved in identifying these items is one of the chief pleasures of any Roguelike, but here it feels a lot more manageable than in later versions, especially for new players.

In many ways, calling the games that were created in the image of *Rogue* "Roguelikes" is a bit of a misnomer. The games that sprang from its combination of dungeon crawling, procedural generation and permadeath expanded variously on its formula, giving them only a passing resemblance to their inspiration.

> "In a lot of ways, I think playing *Rogue* is to playing *Diablo* as reading a book is to watching a movie. When reading a book, you don't see the characters or special effects or action, but you imagine them in your mind, and the effect of the book is just as strong as the effect of a movie. The difference is that you get to make up the images in your own head. Just as some people prefer reading to watching a movie, there are still some (including myself) who prefer *Rogue* to the newer, more graphically intense games."
>
> – *Glen Wichman,*
> Rogue*'s co-creator*



```
You swing and hit the centaur More
Level:11    Hits:18(57)   Str:11(16)   Gold:1780   Armor:2   Exp:7/637
12:32
```

The MS-DOS version of *Rogue*, in which combat is turn-based and very simple: you just move in the direction of the enemy. But there are several items, scrolls and potions, as well as monsters with special abilities.

Many in the Roguelike community only bring up *Rogue* as a marker of how far the genre has come in implementing randomness and increasingly complex systems on top of the core mechanics. I feel like that interpretation sells the game short, and places too much emphasis on overwhelming complexity. Playing *Rogue* taught me the importance of clarity and restraint.

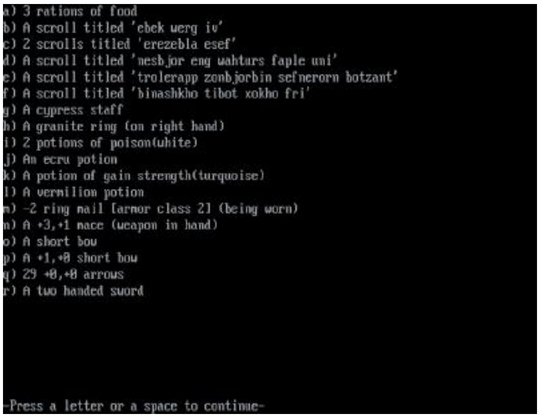
There's something pure about its singular focus on dungeon crawling. It leads to far fewer opportunities for new players to get themselves killed. While there will certainly be times where they'll die due to a miscalculation or misunderstanding of the game, the sheer amount of information and knowledge demanded is far lower than in other Roguelikes.

It's rare, but the clarity of design found in *Rogue* occasionally shines through in more modern designs: Brian Walker's *Brogue* (2009) takes *Rogue*'s classless system to heart and even simplifies it further by making it so the player doesn't need to kill monsters to level up.

Similarly, *Dungeon Crawl: Stone Soup* (2006) has a design philosophy that emphasises the need for clarity and an aversion to grinding or deaths that feel unfair. They are not shy about removing mechanics or character creation options that run counter to those goals.

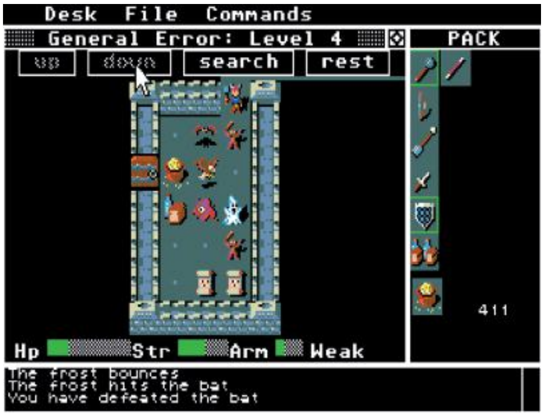
Is it still worth going back to *Rogue*? It's a tough question to answer. I get a lot out of playing *Rogue* and still replay it regularly. But that interest is a combination of nostalgia and the affections of someone who is already deeply interested in Roguelikes as a genre.

In many ways, it's a shame that *Rogue* doesn't come up in discussion as frequently as *ADOM* or *NetHack* do. Its simplified design provides a smoother on-ramp than in other Roguelikes, whose idiosyncrasies and impenetrability frequently place new players in utterly inscrutable and fatal situations. To that end, I think it's a worthwhile starting point: the lessons you learn here will help prepare you for the far more complicated (and unforgiving) fare the genre is known for. **RP**



```
a) 3 rations of food
b) A scroll titled 'ebck werg iv'
c) 2 scrolls titled 'erezebla esef'
d) A scroll titled 'nesbjor eng wahturs faple uni'
e) A scroll titled 'trolerapp zonbjorbin sefnerorn botzant'
f) A scroll titled 'binashkho tibot xokho fri'
g) A cypress staff
h) A granite ring (on right hand)
i) 2 potions of poison(white)
j) An ecru potion
k) A potion of gain strength(turquoise)
l) A vermilion potion
m) -2 ring mail [armor class 2] (being worn)
n) A +3,+1 mace (weapon in hand)
o) A short bow
p) A +1,+0 short bow
q) 29 +0,+0 arrows
r) A two handed sword

-Press a letter or a space to continue-
```

The game's inventory, with some potions identified but several magical scrolls with effects I still haven't uncovered



```
The frost bounces
The frost hits the bat
You have defeated the bat
```

Epyx also released a graphical version of *Rogue* for Amiga and Atari ST, but the zoomed view made it harder to play

Wizardry:

Proving Grounds of the Mad Overlord

Wizardry
TM

Sir-Tech, 1981
Apple II, MS-DOS, C64, Mac, NES, SNES, etc.*

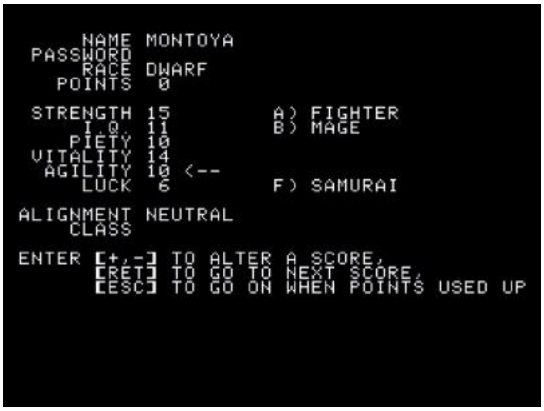
***Wizardry* was exclusive to the Apple II until 1984, but has since been ported or remade for dozens of systems, such as the SNES, PS1, Saturn, mobile phones, etc. Sadly, many of these versions only came out in Japan.**

Back in 1978, two university undergraduates, Andrew Greenberg and Robert Woodhead, started to develop their own computer RPG. They took a lot from the PLATO games (especially *Oubliette*), but also added some revolutionary ideas, which kept their friends playing for nights on end.

This would be the first game to give players control over a party of characters instead of just a lone hero, sending them to explore an expertly crafted dungeon full of perils and secrets. It was the birth of the most influential dungeon crawler of all time: *Wizardry*.

However, they coded the game using Pascal and had to wait months for Apple to actually support the language before the game could run on any Apple II. In the meantime, they kept improving its technical aspects, as well as balancing the gameplay, creating the most complex and polished home computer game released so far. It even had an animated intro!

Wizardry quickly became one of the best-selling computer games of the ’80s – a true phenomenon that topped sales and rating charts for years and led to the birth of unofficial game guides, trainers and edit tools.



```
     NAME MONTOYA
 PASSWORD
     RACE DWARF
   POINTS  0

 STRENGTH 15         A) FIGHTER
     I.Q. 11         B) MAGE
    PIETY 10
 VITALITY 14
  AGILITY 10 <--
     LUCK  6         F) SAMURAI

ALIGNMENT NEUTRAL
    CLASS

ENTER [+,-] TO ALTER A SCORE,
      [RET] TO GO TO NEXT SCORE,
      [ESC] TO GO ON WHEN POINTS USED UP
```

Characters can be Fighters, Mages, Priests or Thieves depending on their stats; those with high stats can upgrade into elite classes: Bishop, Samurai, Lord and Ninja

Wizardry: Proving Grounds of the Mad Overlord is a pure dungeon crawler. Unlike *Might and Magic* or *Ultima,* it makes no attempt at creating a detailed setting with a rich history. It doesn’t even provide a world outside its dungeon – the town of Llylgamyn is nothing more than a menu from which you can access services like a shop, an inn, a tavern and a temple.

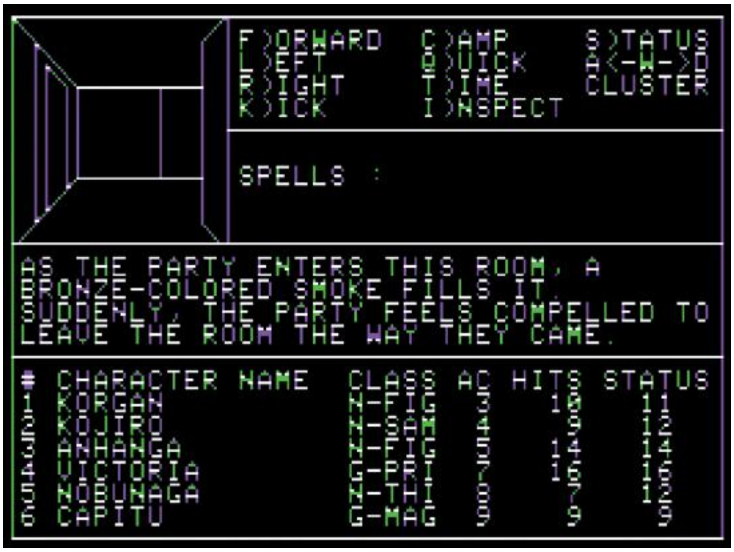
There is, of course, a quest you’re supposed to accomplish: defeating the evil arch-wizard Werdna and retrieving his amulet. But the game is ultimately about exploring a massive dungeon, surviving tough battles and power-building your party. This is where *Wizardry*’s secret lies: a focus on seemingly simple, yet highly addictive and replayable gameplay.

Wizardry is a claustrophobic experience, and it uses difficulty to enforce this concept. There’s no save feature – if a party member dies you must find his body and drag it to the temple for a chance at bringing him back, use rare resurrection spells that would reduce the character’s Constitution, or just re-roll a new character. The same applies if the entire party dies, obviously.

Thus, *Wizardry* is a game of danger assessment and resource management, in which your ability to win encounters unscathed decides how deep you’ll be able to go. This makes every fight relevant; if you lose hit points or waste spells in non-lethal encounters, they’ll quickly add up and force you to return to town – not via a handy Town Portal, but by walking back.

Besides the battles, the dungeon itself proves to be a big challenge. There’s no auto-map, of course, and each level is full of false walls, spinners, teleporters, chutes and other nice surprises. The huge dungeon is divided into ten descending levels, and your primary task in each of them is to find the stairs or elevator that allows you to go deeper. All of this may sound more frustrating than fun, but believe me, it’s both.

> "Both Andy [Greenberg] and I were active on the PLATO system, which was a tremendous influence on us. PLATO had email, chat, newsgroups, multiplayer real-time games and much more, all starting in the early '70s. The multiplayer dungeon games were particularly good […] *Wizardry* was in many ways our attempt to see if we could write a single-player game as cool as the PLATO dungeon games and cram it into a tiny machine like the Apple II."
>
> *– Robert Woodhead,*
> Wizardry*'s co-creator*



```
F)ORWARD  C)AMP     S)TATUS
L)EFT     Q)UICK    A<-W->D
R)IGHT    T)IME     CLUSTER
K)ICK     I)NSPECT

SPELLS :

AS THE PARTY ENTERS THIS ROOM, A
BRONZE-COLORED SMOKE FILLS IT.
SUDDENLY, THE PARTY FEELS COMPELLED TO
LEAVE THE ROOM THE WAY THEY CAME.

# CHARACTER NAME    CLASS AC HITS STATUS
1 KORGAN            N-FIG  3   10     11
2 KOJIRO            N-SAM  4    9     12
3 ANHANGA           N-FIG  5   14     14
4 VICTORIA          G-PRI  7   16     16
5 NOBUNAGA          N-THI  8    7     12
6 CAPITU            G-MAG  9    9      9
```

Wizardry wasn't the first game to have first-person dungeons, but their complexity was revolutionary: instead of random generation, they were hand-made and filled with secrets, events, traps and many other surprises

Wizardry has some balance issues (Thieves are useless in combat) and rather unfair mechanics (levelling up can decrease stats), but a common criticism is how empty some parts of the dungeon are, as special encounters and locations are few and far between.

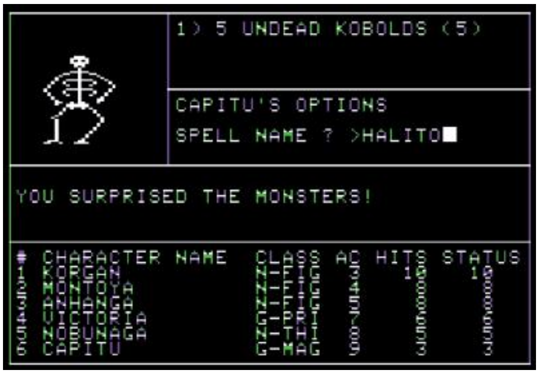
This was addressed in the two next *Wizardry* games, *Knight of Diamonds* and *Legacy of Llylgamyn*. They focused on bringing better content, with only minor gameplay adjustments. While nowadays these games are referred to as sequels, they were originally sold as "scenarios" – extra content for the first game.

Knight of Diamonds was released in 1982 and originally required that you transferred your party over from *Wizardry I* (later ports added character creation). The characters are then tasked with finding the pieces of a legendary armour set, which can be used by them. Each level featured distinct puzzles and had more interesting encounters than just combat, making exploration much more meaningful.

The final entry in the original trilogy is *Legacy of Llylgamyn* (1983). This time your previous party isn't exactly imported, but rather used as ancestors for new characters; their stats carry over, but you'll start with a level 1 party. The game expands the role of alignments, as some areas can only be entered by good characters, while others are exclusive to evil ones. This forces the player to handle two parties, or to plan an alignment switch mid-game. More importantly, the design of the dungeons remains great and features more unique puzzles, locations and content than previous titles.

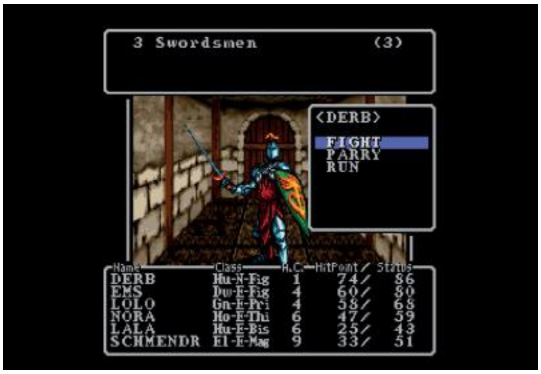
Wizardry is more than a series: it's an entire genre. Besides the eight main titles developed by Sir-Tech, there are over 30 official *Wizardry* games made in Japan, plus hundreds of clones and variants known as DRPGs (Dungeon RPGs). There's a reason why this is one of the most influential and long-lasting series ever: it remains extremely fun. But don't take my word for it, the dungeon awaits you! **DB**

Nowadays the best way to play *Wizardry* is with the fan-translation of *Wizardry: Story of Llylgamyn*, a Japanese remake of the first three games for the SNES, featuring much better graphics, UI and balance.



```
1) 5 UNDEAD KOBOLDS (5)

CAPITU'S OPTIONS
SPELL NAME ? >HALITO

YOU SURPRISED THE MONSTERS!

# CHARACTER NAME    CLASS AC HITS STATUS
1 KORGAN            N-FIG  3   10     10
2 MONTOYA           N-FIG  4    8      8
3 ANHANGA           N-FIG  5    8      8
4 VICTORIA          G-PRI  7    6      6
5 NOBUNAGA          N-THI  8    5      5
6 CAPITU            G-MAG  9    3      3
```

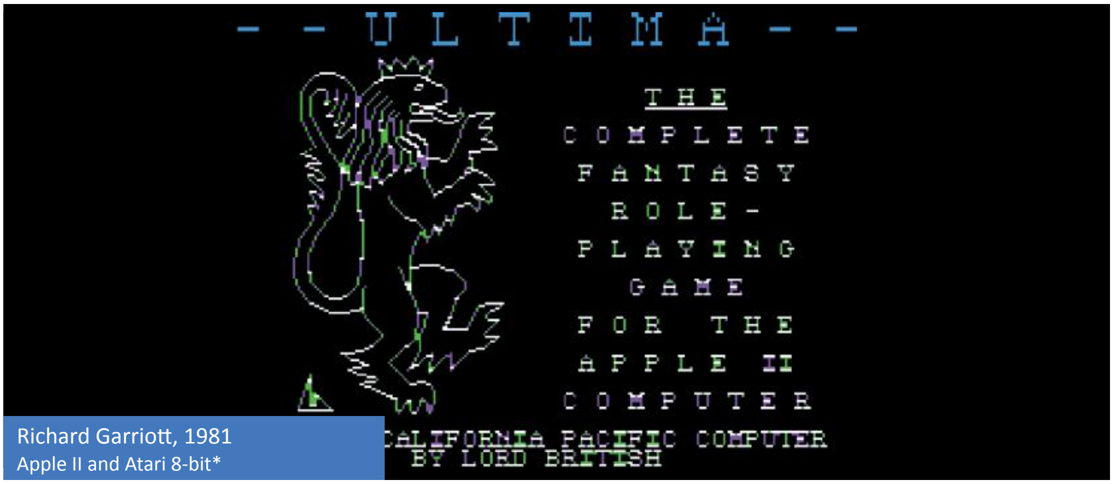
Wizardry has a deep magic system with 46 spells in two schools; to cast them you must manually type their names



```
3 Swordsmen          (3)

<DERB>
FIGHT
PARRY
RUN

Name      Class    A.C. HitPoint/ Status
DERB      Hu-N-Fig  1     74/      86
EMS       Dw-E-Fig  4     60/      80
LOLO      Gn-E-Pri  4     58/      68
NORA      Ho-E-Thi  6     47/      59
LALA      Hu-E-Bis  6     25/      43
SCHMENDR  El-E-Mag  9     33/      51
```

The SNES remake of the initial *Wizardry* trilogy has much better graphics and interface, making it a great entry point

Ultima



```
- - U L T I M A - -
THE
COMPLETE
FANTASY
ROLE-
PLAYING
GAME
FOR THE
APPLE II
COMPUTER
CALIFORNIA PACIFIC COMPUTER
BY LORD BRITISH
```

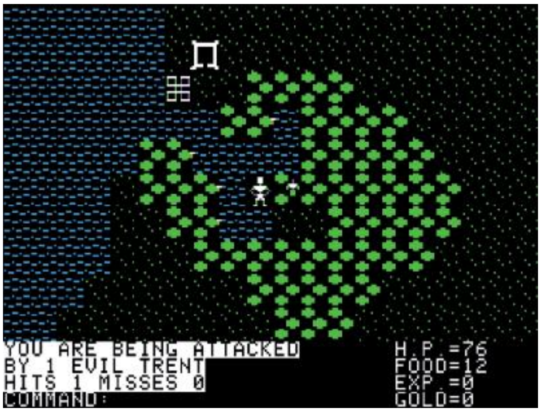
Richard Garriott, 1981
Apple II and Atari 8-bit*

Ultima was the first real, professionally released RPG from Richard Garriott, and it shows. He threw in everything his young computer geek self thought fun, so anything went!

Combining a huge, colourful and innovative overworld map, the randomly generated wire-frame dungeons from *Akalabeth* and even an incredibly frustrating space battle – similar to the Atari 8-bit game, *Star Raiders* – *Ultima* gave players many fun and interesting things to do, and it's easy to see why it was so successful.

As the game begins, the four continents of Sosaria have already been conquered by the evil wizard Mondain, who used the Gem of Immortality to become invincible. Your only hope is to collect four magic gems to power a time machine to go back in time and slay the wizard before he gains his powers.

You can basically explore the world as you want because of how loosely intertwined the game's solution and mechanics are. Which is good, as at its core *Ultima* takes about 2–5 hours to complete, if you know what you are doing.



```
YOU ARE BEING ATTACKED          H.P.=76
BY 1 EVIL TRENT                 FOOD=12
HITS 1 MISSES 0                 EXP.=0
COMMAND:                        GOLD=0
```

The innovative overworld map: I'm inside a forest fighting an Evil Trent; to the north lies the town of Britain and the Castle of Lord British

Most of that time is spent gaining enough gold to buy food and supplies to survive, along with getting enough experience from killing monsters to enable you to acquire the time machine and complete the game. This is all XP is good for – character levels are otherwise irrelevant in this game.

Hit points are gained through killing monsters inside of dungeons and then escaping, or by giving money to one of the eight kings that inhabit the world (one of which is the famous Lord British, Garriott's alter ego). Attribute scores are improved by locating and interacting with signposts spread throughout the world, with bonus points awarded for going to these signposts as quests for four of the kings. Doing quests for the other kings involves killing monsters in the dungeons you would go into anyway, and you can also try to rescue captive princesses from castles.

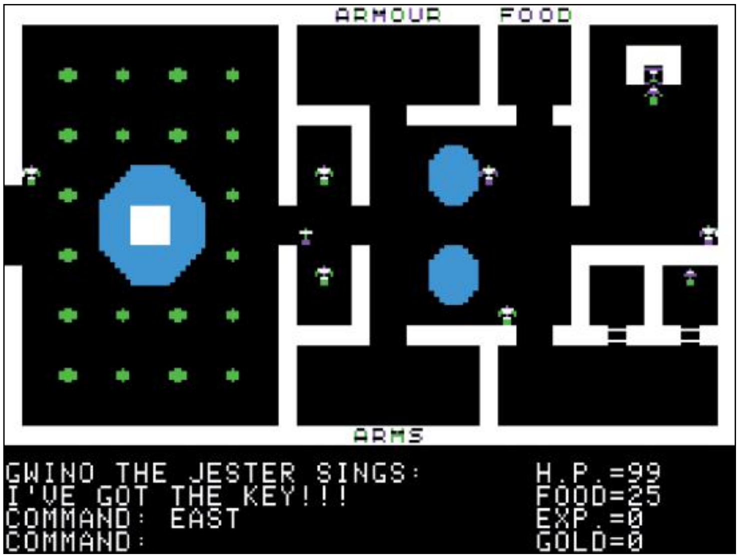
Combat itself is very similar to that in *Akalabeth*, but you have a time limit to act, or you'll lose your turn. And there are random enemy encounters on the overworld map as well, not only inside dungeons.

Towns and castles are one-screen areas where most of the game's solutions are uncovered via jesters talking out loud, or by spending money in bars. Items and food can be bought – or stolen, though that may anger the tough guards. As the player progresses, the technology of the world advances, and a variety of new weapons and armour begins showing up in the stores, going from swords and bows to pistols, energy swords and even a "phazor". There are also vehicles, such as a hovercraft with lasers and a space shuttle.

Ultima allows you to play as a Human, Elf, Dwarf or "Bobbit", in either Fighter, Cleric, Rogue or Wizard form. Those mostly just change your initial attributes, as anyone can use any equipment, but only the Wizard can cast some of the spells.

***In 1986 *Ultima* was re-released as *Ultima 1: The First Age of Darkness*, with new versions for the Apple II, C64, IBM PC and various Japanese computers, such as the MSX2 and FM-Towns.**

> "With the success of *Akalabeth*, I decided to start fresh with my first work intended for public consumption. I began a game originally entitled 'Ultimatum'! Built on much of the same code base as *Akalabeth,* it continued to refine the Richard Garriott virtual world-building techniques. The game maps were largely based on the *D&D* worlds I created called Sosaria. When finished, we launched it under the name *Ultima.*"
>
> *– Richard Garriott,*
> Ultima*'s creator*



```
GWINO THE JESTER SINGS:     H.P.=99
I'VE GOT THE KEY!!!         FOOD=25
COMMAND: EAST               EXP.=0
COMMAND:                    GOLD=0
```

At Lord British's castle, with the Jester shouting he has the key I need: in an RPG, that's a death wish

The magic system is quite simple, with only a few different spells sold as one-cast scrolls. And really, only two are useful: Ladders Up & Down. Those aid in making dungeons much easier, as they allow one to avoid having to seriously map or look for secret doors.

This is part of why *Ultima* was so revolutionary: while other RPGs were dungeon crawlers, *Ultima* was an epic adventure – you would explore a large world, visit towns, talk to kings, ride horses, travel in time, go to space and, yes, also battle monsters in dungeons. Yet it was easy to get started; just read the gorgeous manual illustrated by Denis Loubet to get immersed in the world, and then use the Command Summary Card to learn the few keystrokes required to play.

Ultima was my first real RPG experience. While I had some understanding of this sort of thing thanks to the *Endless Quest* and *Choose Your Own Adventure* books, this game was like nothing my 13-year-old mind had experienced back in 1988 on my new C64.

It taught me keyboard layouts and how these "RPG things" worked. To look for clues. To explore a world with much of its flavour in the manual's wonderful text and artwork. To BE in an adventure, as opposed to just watching the animated *Hobbit* film.

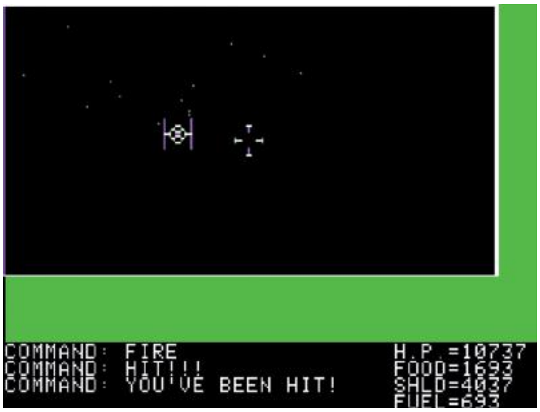
This game took me a good month to complete – with only a single call to Origin's hint line towards the end of the game – in those days before game solutions were easily available. And it made me fall in love with the genre as a whole.

Would a much more difficult and unforgiving game like *Wizardry* have done the same, with its deadly traps and multiple characters, who could all be permanently wiped out in an instant?

Would *Apshai*, with its far more finicky control scheme, world detail hidden within multiple paragraphs to read in a booklet and far slower form of character advancement have done the same?

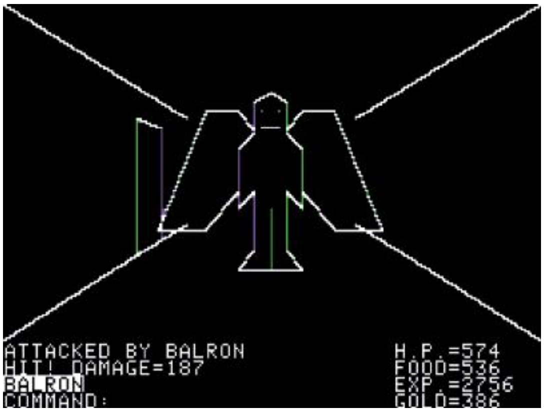
Probably not. **RM**

Fan Joseph Propati created a board game adaptation of *Ultima*, made for solo play. It's free, and you can find it at www.boardgamegeek.com.



```
COMMAND: FIRE               H.P.=10737
COMMAND: HIT!!!             FOOD=1693
COMMAND: YOU'VE BEEN HIT!   SHLD=4037
                            FUEL=693
```

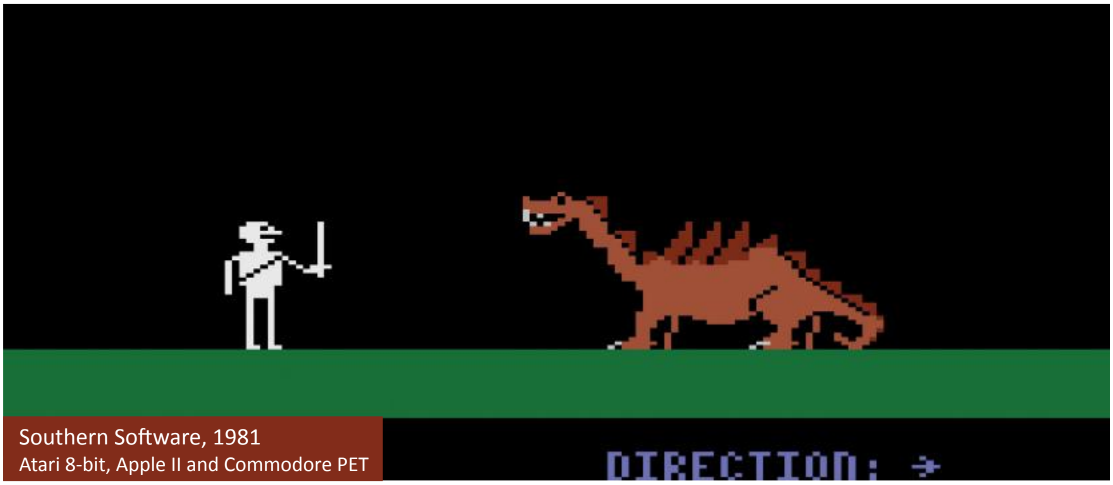
After buying the space shuttle, you must dock at star bases, acquire a spaceship and shoot down TIE-fighter clones



```
ATTACKED BY BALRON          H.P.=574
HIT! DAMAGE=187             FOOD=536
BALRON                      EXP.=2756
COMMAND:                    GOLD=386
```

Here we are on the lowest floor of a dungeon, being approached by a wire-frame Balrog … I mean BalRON!

Dragon's Eye

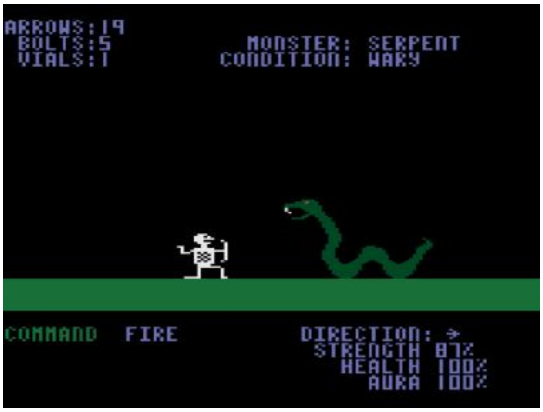


Southern Software, 1981
Atari 8-bit, Apple II and Commodore PET

```
DIRECTION: →
```

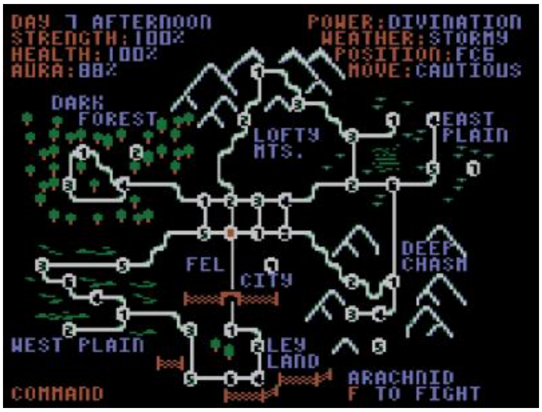
Among the several "proto-RPGs" made in the late '70s and early '80s while the RPG genre was still defining itself, a popular style was the "gather treasures across the land" games.

Directly inspired by *Colossal Cave* (1976) and board games like *Magic Realm* (1979), these were games in which you raced to explore an area and collect treasures, often alternating turns with other players, competing to see who can earn a higher score.



```
ARROWS:19
 BOLTS:5
 VIALS:1
                MONSTER: SERPENT
              CONDITION: WARY

COMMAND   FIRE          DIRECTION: →
                         STRENGTH 87%
                           HEALTH 100%
                             AURA 100%
```

In combat you can perform several actions, like leaping, dodging or executing a barrage of attacks, all of which drain your strength meter



```
DAY 7 AFTERNOON        POWER:DIVINATION
STRENGTH:100%           WEATHER:STORMY
HEALTH:100%             POSITION:FC6
AURA:88%                  MOVE:CAUTIOUS

COMMAND
```

There are 40 locations to explore, divided into seven areas; you can travel quickly between them, or move slowly, trying to avoid random encounters

Being a very early title, still sold on cassette tapes, *Dragon's Eye* is a simple game, beatable in an hour or so. You start by naming your hero, then choosing a weapon and a title, after which you'll get a random selection of spells and be sent to the world map.

Your goal is to find the mythical Dragon's Eye and return with it to the starting city within 21 days. Once you do so, you win the game and will be rated based on battles won and treasures recovered.

You play by moving around the world map and searching locations for treasures or clues to their location. Actions like walking, searching and resting take a certain amount of time, based on factors like your speed and the weather, but you can use spells like Cure Self or Teleport to help with the time limit.

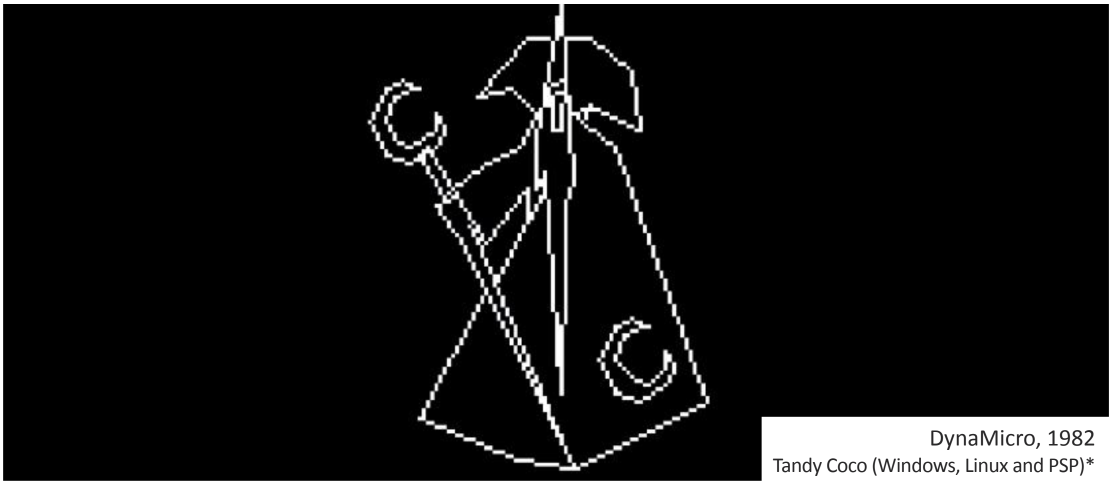
Unlike other games of this kind, *Dragon's Eye* has no competing AI opponents, quests, special events or dungeons – you just walk around searching areas repeatedly, as there's a good chance of finding items.

What makes *Dragon's Eye* stand out is its combat. When you encounter an enemy, the screen goes to a 2D side-view and you control your character much as in a fighting game, but in turns: you can move left or right, chop, do an overhead attack, leap, dodge, block, use an item, fire an arrow, etc.

Each action drains your strength, reducing the power of blows and forcing you to rest afterwards. It's primitive and unreliable but highly original, coming from a time before fighting games even existed.

This unique blend of 2D combat and turn-based RPG would be revisited in *Windwalker* (1989), and later games like *Wizard Wars* (1988) and *Moonstone: A Hard Days Knight* (1991) would greatly expand the "find all treasures" concept, but *Dragon's Eye* deserves praise as one of the many forgotten pioneers that helped shape video games. **FE**

Dungeons of Daggorath



DynaMicro, 1982
Tandy Coco (Windows, Linux and PSP)*

Tension flows at every step. The only sounds you hear are your own heartbeats, and the distinct roar of beasts who wish to stop it. *Dungeons of Daggorath* is, in many ways, the logical follow-up to the similarly brutal *Akalabeth*.

The player takes the role of a prophetic hero out to defeat an evil wizard who spreads darkness over the land. In desperation, your village sends you into the wizard's dungeons, with nary but a wooden sword and a torch to light the way.

Daggorath ramps up the stakes from prior first-person dungeon crawlers by being fully real-time. Commands must be quickly input in the text parser, since enemies won't patiently wait for their turn. To make things easier, you can use abbreviations, such as typing "A R" instead of "Attack Right" to strike with the weapon in your right hand.

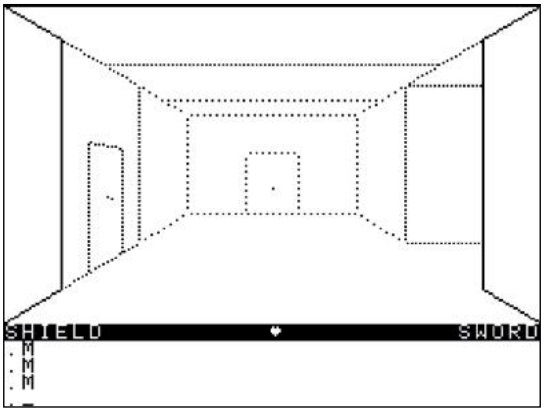
Linked in deep with this is the mechanic of a constant heartbeat representing the character's health. It will steadily accelerate as the player takes action or gets hit by enemies; exhausting yourself or taking too much damage will send your heart into a tailspin, possibly leading to a blackout. Players must find a safe place and catch their breath for a bit, unless they want to risk a heart attack ending their adventure.

Exploration is limited by torches the player collects. If a torch begins to dim, your hit rate against monsters becomes lessened as their outlines become dimmed. Having to replace torches or other items requires real-time inventory management, during which a slow player can be decimated.

The real defining characteristic of *Daggorath* is its atmosphere, using its monochromatic colour palette and foreboding heartbeat sound to the fullest. Each step carries not just the fear of being overrun by monsters, but also of getting lost in the dungeon.

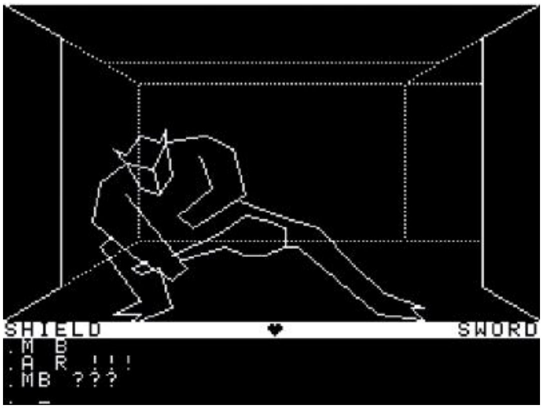
The game culminates in the fifth-level dungeon, where you wrestle with the parser to activate a magic ring that finally gives the wizard what for, and you take your position as the ruler of Daggorath.

Dungeons of Daggorath is certainly still worth experiencing, being an important precursor to *Dungeon Master* (1987). It's not easily digestible, but every single element has a purpose. The RPG legacy owes at least a respectful nod to *Daggorath*. **EJ**



```
SHIELD          ♥          SWORD
.M
.M
.M
._
```

The dungeon has no traps, but is full of fake walls; it also changes colours, with some floors black while others are white

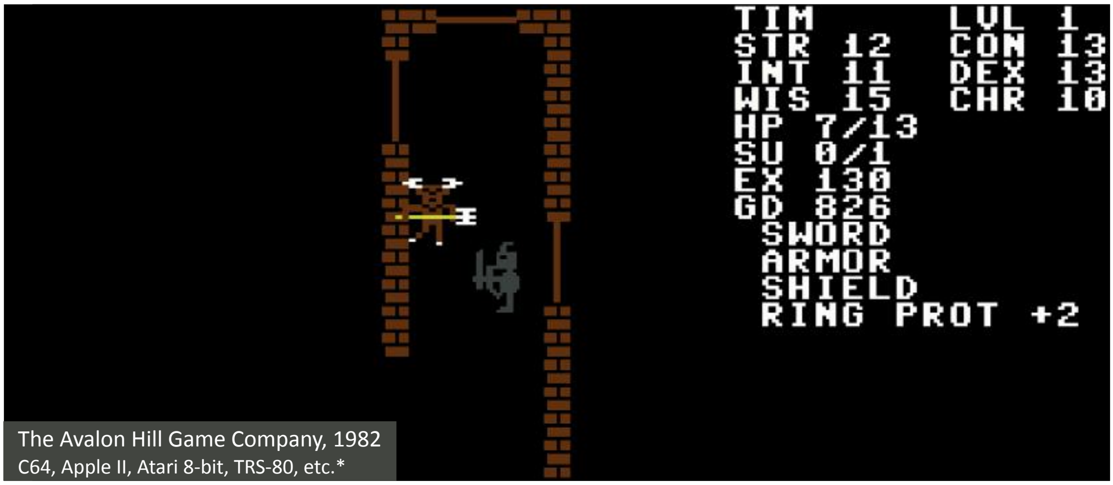


```
SHIELD          ♥          SWORD
.M B
.A R !!!
.MB ???
._
```

Powerful enemies such as the Stone Giant can kill you in one blow, so quickly attacking and running is key to your survival – be careful not to mistype!

***Douglas Morgan, former president of DynaMicro, released the source code of *Daggorath*, which led to fans creating various ports that can be legally downloaded.**

Telengard

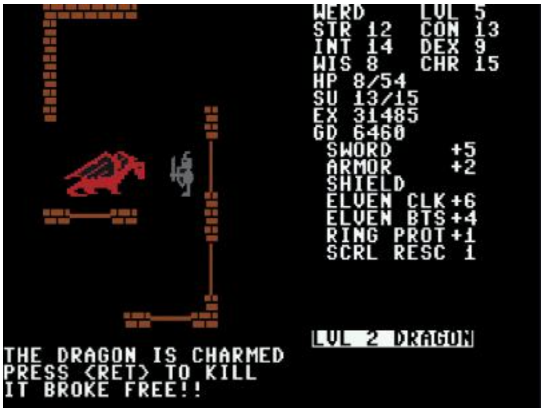


```
TIM            LVL  1
STR  12        CON 13
INT  11        DEX 13
WIS  15        CHR 10
HP  7/13
SU  0/1
EX  130
GD  826
 SWORD
 ARMOR
 SHIELD
 RING  PROT  +2
```

The Avalon Hill Game Company, 1982
C64, Apple II, Atari 8-bit, TRS-80, etc.*

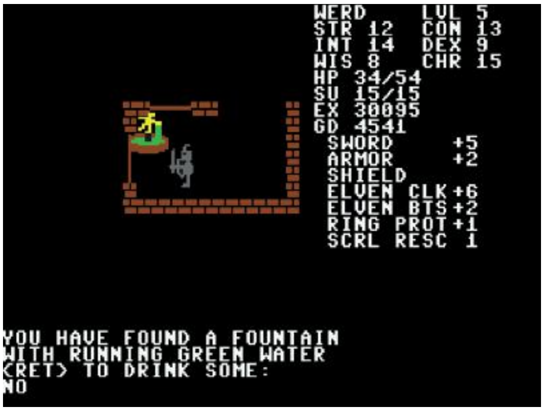
When I was eleven, I discovered *Telengard*. While not the most advanced CRPG at the time, it was incredibly addictive and replayable. The game is built around almost arcade-like runs into the dungeon to see just how far you can get in a single session before inevitably conceding defeat.

Every few years, I still wander back to try my luck delving the depths of the dungeon. *Telengard*'s biggest strength, however, is also its greatest weakness.



```
WERD      LVL 5
STR 12    CON 13
INT 14    DEX 9
WIS 8     CHR 15
HP 8/54
SU 13/15
EX 31485
GD 6460
 SWORD      +5
 ARMOR      +2
 SHIELD
 ELVEN CLK+6
 ELVEN BTS+4
 RING PROT+1
 SCRL RESC 1

LVL 2 DRAGON
THE DRAGON IS CHARMED
PRESS <RET> TO KILL
IT BROKE FREE!!
```

Telengard is brutally unfair: you can start the game, encounter a very powerful monster and die permanently in a few seconds



```
WERD      LVL 5
STR 12    CON 13
INT 14    DEX 9
WIS 8     CHR 15
HP 34/54
SU 15/15
EX 30095
GD 4541
 SWORD      +5
 ARMOR      +2
 SHIELD
 ELVEN CLK+6
 ELVEN BTS+2
 RING PROT+1
 SCRL RESC 1

YOU HAVE FOUND A FOUNTAIN
WITH RUNNING GREEN WATER
<RET> TO DRINK SOME:
NO
```

Instead of directly controlling your character, you input cardinal directions and move from screen to screen

Apart from the dungeon layout, everything is randomised – your initial stats, which monster you are going to face, what their levels are, and what treasures you will manage to scrounge up. The wild nature of the RNG ensures that every session is wildly different, but can also lead to frustration. It's a game that requires patience to get a good start, and the tenacity to not despair when you lose everything in one uncontrollable moment – especially since you have a short time limit to input your actions every turn.

This is why I keep coming back to *Telengard*; most CRPGs are carefully designed around difficulty curves, balance, and making sure the player is always in control. *Telengard* just ruthlessly throws the player in and starts delivering the fun. The feeling of having survived a mid-level dragon early in the game is unsurpassed by what other games give you when they have encounters perfectly balanced for where you are in the game.

In the end I still do crave control, and will drift away from *Telengard* for a while every time, but that feeling when you get back to it is hard to beat.

While *Telengard* is often mislabelled as a Roguelike, its dungeons aren't random but procedurally generated, spanning 50 massive floors. On the other hand, there's no end goal – you just survive as long as possible.

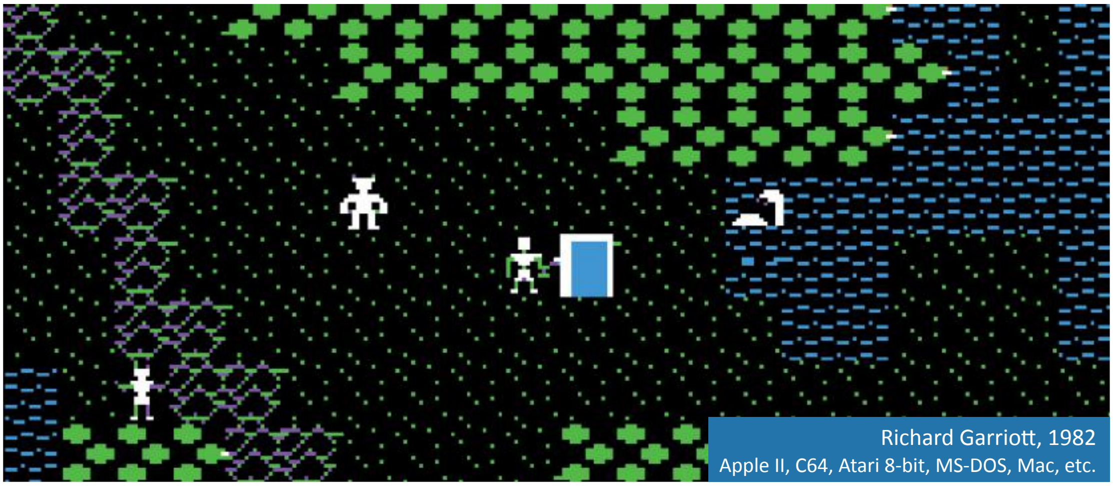
The game's developer, Daniel Lawrence, claims he created *Telengard* as a home computer port of a game called *DND* that he wrote while at Purdue University. The controversy is that Lawrence's *DND* and *Telengard* have many elements that are similar to PLATO's *dnd*. This led to criticism and many plagiarism accusations, since *Telengard* was released as a commercial title.

Regardless, we didn't know about any of this at the time. *Telengard* became a popular title among early CRPG fans, and many, like me, still enjoy challenging its unforgiving RNG from time to time. **DM**

***Over the years fans have created enhanced versions of *Telengard*, and a Windows port. The latter was created by Travis Baldree, co-founder of Runic Games.**

Ultima II:

Revenge of the Enchantress



Richard Garriott, 1982
Apple II, C64, Atari 8-bit, MS-DOS, Mac, etc.

After the success of *Ultima I*, Richard Garriott spent over a year working to create a sequel. During this time he taught himself how to program in assembly language, allowing for several improvements in graphical variety and scale.

But what really defined *Ultima II* was that, in the meantime, Garriott saw Terry Gilliam's *Time Bandits* (1981), a light-hearted fantasy movie about a kid who meets a group of dwarves and travels through several time periods by using a magic map.

Heavily inspired by this movie, Garriott moved *Ultima II* from the magical land of Sosaria to Earth. After the wizard Mondain was defeated in the previous game, his apprentice and lover Minax learns time travel and floods Earth's past, present and future with her evil minions. Lord British calls upon a new hero to step forward and undo Minax's wicked work.

To do so, the hero travels across five time periods using magical gates, which would become an iconic feature of the *Ultima* series. As in the movie, a map shows all the gates and where and when they lead to. This map was actually a physical cloth map, included in the game's box. Back then, most games were still being sold inside crude ziplock bags, and Garriott was snubbed by several publishers until Sierra On-Line agreed to produce a box with the map.

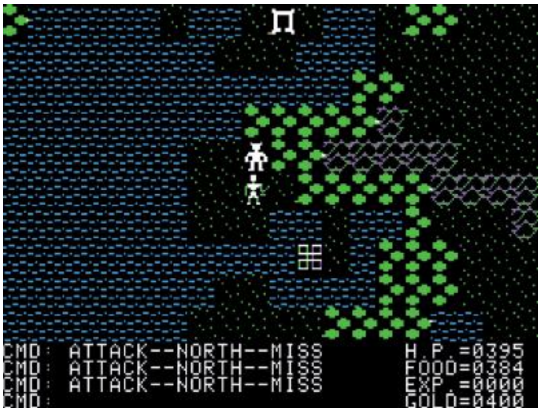
If time travel isn't enough for you, *Ultima II* also goes into space, allowing you to visit the nine planets of our solar system (back when Pluto was a planet!). Sadly, these areas have barely any content or story to them – apart from a few Easter eggs – and even the first-person dungeons are mostly pointless.

Truly, you'll spend most of the game battling monsters for key items that randomly drop, cursing the poorly balanced character system and grinding until you're strong enough to attack Minax's fortress.

Another reason why *Ultima II* isn't discussed much today is that its events were retconned in future games of the series. This solved the confusing mess of why Sosarian characters were on Earth and fixed any plot holes derived from timeline-altering events.

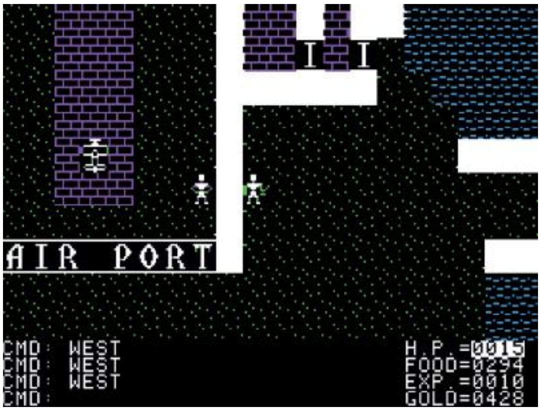
Ultima II had great ideas that impressed gamers back then, but the repetitive gameplay and lack of meaningful content make it the most dated game in the series. Still, greater things were yet to come. **FE**

In 1983, Sierra On-Line published *Ultima: Escape from Mt. Drash*, a crude dungeon crawler for the VIC-20. It has nothing to do with the Ultima series, but Garriott allowed Sierra to use the series' name.



```
CMD: ATTACK--NORTH--MISS          H.P.=0395
CMD: ATTACK--NORTH--MISS          FOOD=0384
CMD: ATTACK--NORTH--MISS          EXP.=0000
CMD:                              GOLD=0400
```

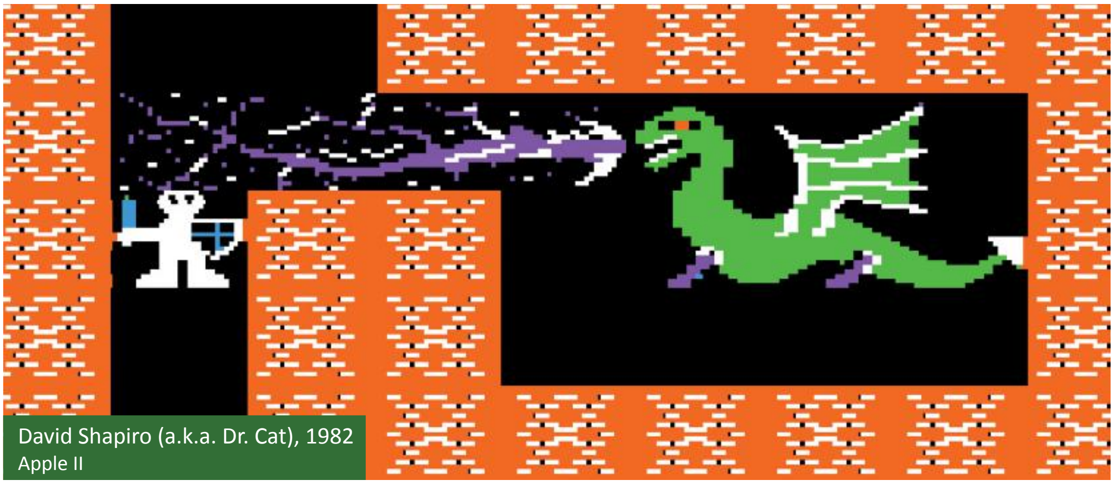
Fighting an Orc in 1423 BC Europe; the world map isn't very big, but it's slightly different in each time period



```
CMD: WEST                         H.P.=0015
CMD: WEST                         FOOD=0294
CMD: WEST                         EXP.=0010
CMD:                              GOLD=0428
```

While *Ultima II* looks a lot like its predecessor, it packs some improvements, such as large towns to explore and animated water tiles

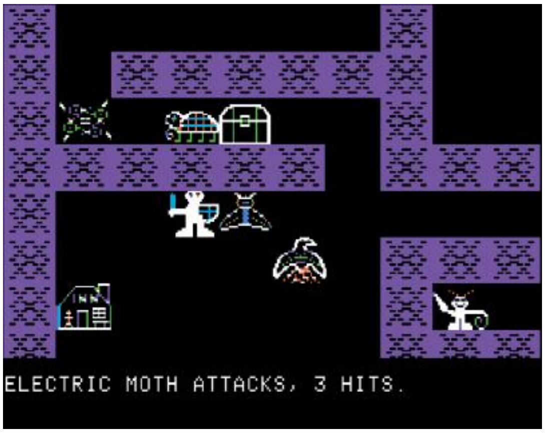
The Caverns of Freitag



David Shapiro (a.k.a. Dr. Cat), 1982
Apple II

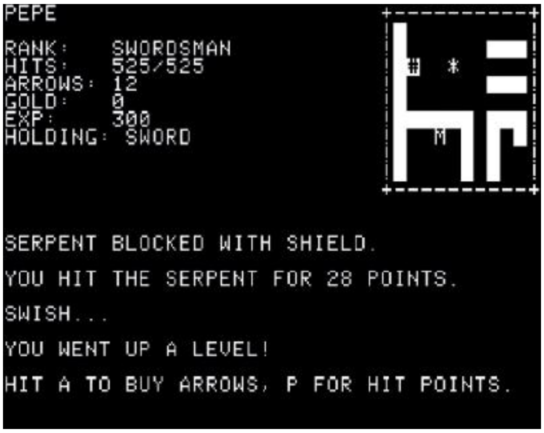
Caverns of Freitag is a great example of how difficult it can be to trace a game's legacy. For decades considered a minor and mostly inconsequential early RPG, it had, as revealed by a casual 2013 tweet by Nihom Falcom's Yoshio Kiya, reached all the way to Japan and become the blueprint for one of the country's most influential RPG series.

Samuel Messner wrote a great article tracing the influence of *Caverns of Freitag* on *Dragon Slayer.*



```
ELECTRIC MOTH ATTACKS, 3 HITS.
```

The starting area, where the Inn is: it's the only place where you can level up and buy arrows, so you'll have to return to it constantly



```
PEPE
RANK:     SWORDSMAN
HITS:     525/525
ARROWS:   12
GOLD:     0
EXP:      300
HOLDING:  SWORD


SERPENT BLOCKED WITH SHIELD.
YOU HIT THE SERPENT FOR 28 POINTS.
SWISH...
YOU WENT UP A LEVEL!
HIT A TO BUY ARROWS, P FOR HIT POINTS.
```

A unique feature of *Caverns of Freitag* are its multiple displays: you can freely switch between a graphical view, a text-only view and a full-screen map of the maze

The game is a turn-based dungeon-crawler, with a single level that's 80 × 80 squares in size. This maze holds 14 different kinds of monster, some possessing abilities such as being able to walk twice in a turn, go invisible or disguise themselves as treasure chests.

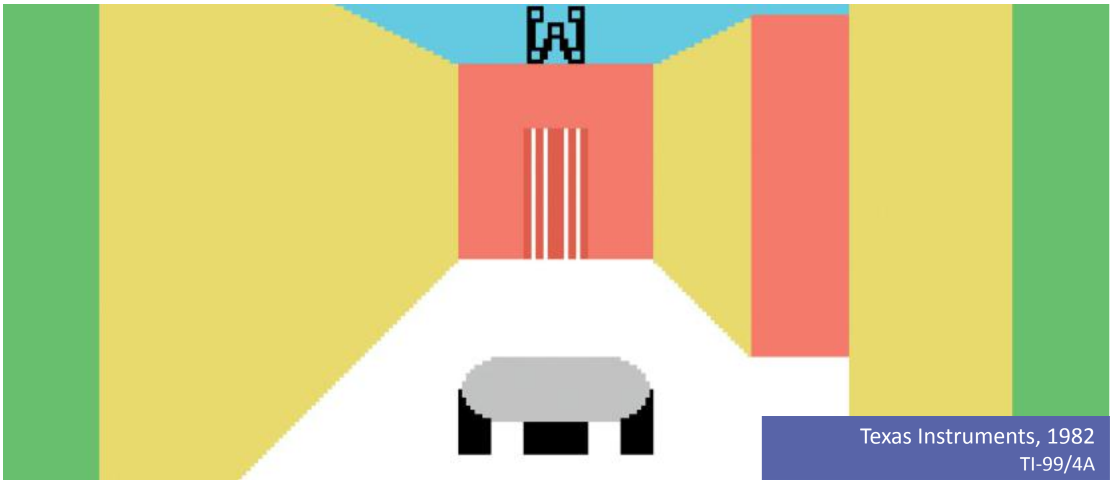
Your warrior can move in eight directions, attack with his sword or fire arrows with his bow. Killing monsters awards XP; earn enough and you can return to the starting point to heal and level up. If things get too dangerous, you can magically transform into an agile bird and try to outmanoeuvre the monsters.

You play by fighting easy monsters until you are strong enough to fight harder ones and eventually to defeat the massive dragon that awaits at the other side of the labyrinth. If you manage to defeat him, you earn the title "Dragon Slayer". Overall, it's a fun, arcade-like RPG that can be completed in less than an hour, with only one map layout and no save function.

While *Freitag* wasn't a big hit back in the US, it somehow made its way to Japan, where Nihon Falcom operated as the country's official Apple II distributor. An employee named Yoshio Kiya got to play it and copied the game's concept to create the highly influential *Dragon Slayer* (1984). Extremely similar in presentation and design, *Dragon Slayer* enforces a very short time limit for each turn (*Freitag* lets you set the speed). It's so fast it's considered one of the first action RPGs, with its success paving the way for other legendary Japanese titles, like *Xanadu* and *Ys*.

Caverns of Freitag's developer, Dr. Cat, would later join Richard Garriott at Origin Systems, working on *Ultima V* and *VI* (he's featured as an NPC in those games). However, his most famous work would be *Furcadia*, a pioneer free-to-play graphical MUD released in 1996. Focused on role-playing and user-created content, *Furcadia* is still in operation as of 2021. **FE**

Tunnels of Doom



Texas Instruments, 1982
TI-99/4A

The story of the TI-99 computer is fascinating. Created in 1979 by giant tech company Texas Instruments to break into the home computer market, the TI-99/4 had a very troubled development, a ludicrous price of $1,500 USD, and suffered from terrible business decisions. Texas Instruments tried to salvage it with an updated model, the TI-99/4A, then completely gave up on the market in 1983 and sold its shares at a loss – for as low as $49 each – making the TI-99 line a rather popular failed product.

Very few games were developed for the machine, as the company shunned third-party developers. But it had a golden exclusive, made by Texas Instrument's programmer Kevin Kenney: *Tunnels of Doom*.

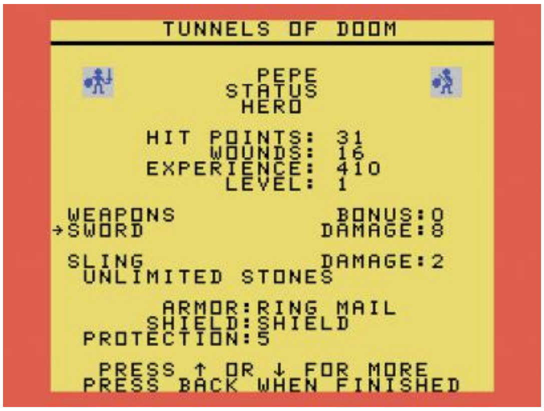
The game came as a ROM cartridge containing the game's engine and two disks (or cassette tapes) with an adventure each. After creating your party, you explore a procedurally-generated dungeon based on the adventure you're playing. *Pennies and Prizes* is a simple item hunt with no combat, while *Quest for the King* has you exploring a dungeon full of monsters to rescue the King, under a time limit.

The dungeon's corridors are explored in first-person, with solid colours instead of wire frames. Once you enter a room, the game changes to a top-down view, letting you loot treasure, search for secrets or lockpick vaults. If there's an enemy, combat begins. This room-based approach gave *ToD*'s turn-based combat an innovative tactical layer, requiring the player to move their party around the room during battle.

Overall, *Tunnels of Doom* is an impressive game. Created over 18 months, it has a lot of well-polished features that were ahead of *Wizardry* and *Ultima*, like its tactical combat, an auto-map, a lockpicking system, a bestiary, the use of solid colours and a theme song. It's truly a shame it was stuck in a defunct platform.

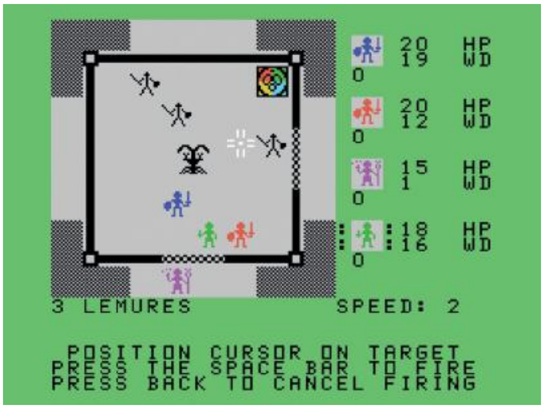
Even after the TI-99's demise, *ToD* would keep breaking new ground. In 1985, a police officer called John Behnke created a module editor for the game. He began selling new adventures – adding items, enemies and quests – later also selling the editor itself. It was a niche product for a dead platform, but led to amusing games such as *Quest for the True King*, an adventure released in 1989 in which you must stop Elvis Presley's evil twin from destroying the singer's legacy. **FE**

***Tunnels of Doom* was created to support multiple adventures, but Texas Instruments laid off its creator right after its release.**



TUNNELS OF DOOM
PEPE
STATUS
HERO
HIT POINTS: 31
WOUNDS: 16
EXPERIENCE: 410
LEVEL: 1
WEAPONS BONUS:0
→SWORD DAMAGE:8
SLING DAMAGE:2
UNLIMITED STONES
ARMOR:RING MAIL
SHIELD:SHIELD
PROTECTION:5
PRESS ↑ OR ↓ FOR MORE
PRESS BACK WHEN FINISHED

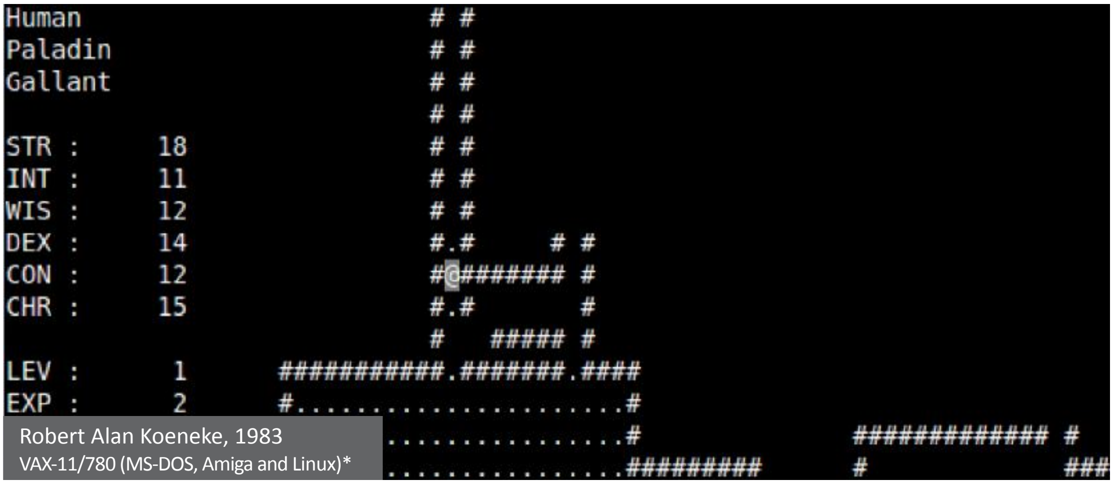
You can create a party of 1–4 characters, choosing from three classes with special skills and equipment options, or play solo, picking a Hero class that has all the skills



20 HP
19 WD
0
20 HP
12 WD
0
15 HP
1 WD
0
18 HP
16 WD
0
3 LEMURES
SPEED: 2
POSITION CURSOR ON TARGET
PRESS THE SPACE BAR TO FIRE
PRESS BACK TO CANCEL FIRING

In combat, each character can move once and then attack once, using blades, ranged weapons or magical scrolls; enemies can have special skills like corroding your armour, and some can even be persuaded to let you pass

Moria



```
Human
Paladin
Gallant

STR :      18
INT :      11
WIS :      12
DEX :      14
CON :      12
CHR :      15

LEV :       1
EXP :       2
```

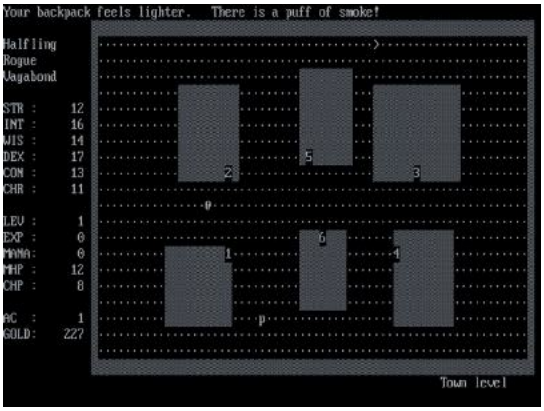
Robert Alan Koeneke, 1983
VAX-11/780 (MS-DOS, Amiga and Linux)*

***The original *Moria* was made for VAX-11/780 computers, but its creator shared the source code freely, which allowed various versions and ports, under the requirement that they were kept non-commercial.**

First released in 1983, *Moria* started out as a *Rogue* clone for University of Oklahoma's VAX-11/780 mini-computer (not to be confused with the 1975 *Moria* game for PLATO). As development went on, the game started to differ significantly from its predecessor: the setting became Tolkien's Middle Earth and the objective was to kill the Balrog.

More importantly, *Moria* introduced several features that would later become essential to certain sub-genre of Roguelikes: a town with shops at the top of the dungeon, scrolling multiple-screen maps, spells, artefact items with special properties, character classes and races, and the need to carry a source of light.

At the beginning of each game, a new character must be created. Race, class and sex are chosen by the player while all the stats, as well as the character's background, are randomised (the game allows re-rolling so one shouldn't worry too much). From then on, *Moria* is pure dungeon crawling, with occasional trips back to the town in order to sell useless equipment and buy better, replenish food and torches, and identify unknown items.



```
Your backpack feels lighter.  There is a puff of smoke!

Halfling
Rogue
Vagabond

STR :    12
INT :    16
WIS :    14
DEX :    17
CON :    13
CHR :    11

LEV :     1
EXP :     0
MANA:     0
MHP :    12
CHP :     8

AC  :     1
GOLD:   227
```

The town shops allow you to prepare yourself for the dungeon, but beware, as beggars and thieves also roam the streets and may steal your gold – or life

The game (as well as others inspired by it) is focused mostly on combat and exploration and doesn't feature *NetHack*'s item-based puzzles or *ADOM*'s quests – like *Rogue* before it, it's all about getting to the bottom of the dungeon while fighting against hordes of monsters. Levels (with the exception of the town) in *Moria* don't persist – when you return to the dungeon floor you've visited, it will be generated anew.

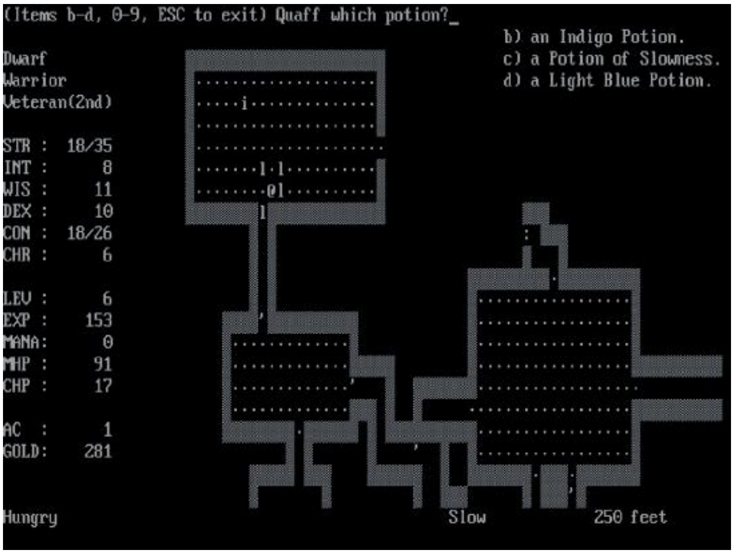
Moria's interface differs a bit from that of *Rogue*: this time, the playing area occupies the right side of the screen, with the character information placed on the left. There are also a few graphical differences, like the walls being denoted by a hash sign and the inequality signs being used for staircases.

The game is played through a text terminal (with the usual possibility of playing the game remotely through Telnet or SSH) and controlled with the keyboard. The control scheme might be a problem for laptop owners, as most versions of *Moria* are controlled via the numpad, without the possibility of using arrow keys or mouse control.

Unfortunately, *Moria* is an early Roguelike and it suffers from many of the same problems a player might encounter in *Rogue* or *Hack*: it's difficult, while not being complex enough to provide you with a way of preparing yourself for the worst encounters.

That would be enough to make your survival in any game dependent on the mercy of random number generators, but *Moria* takes it a few steps further: while the game was being developed, each new version was supposed to be a challenge for the veteran players who've managed to beat the previous ones. As a result, *Moria*'s difficulty makes the game unwelcoming even to those who've played Roguelikes before and don't have a problem with procedurally-generated levels, permanent death and a high level of difficulty.

> “I listened a lot to my players and kept making enhancements to the game to fix problems, to challenge them, and to keep them going. If anyone managed to win, I immediately found out how, and ‘enhanced’ the game to make it harder. I once vowed it was ‘unbeatable’, and a week later a friend of mine beat it! His character, ‘Iggy’, was placed into the game as ‘The Evil Iggy’, and immortalised. And, of course, I went in and plugged up the trick he used to win.”
>
> – *Robert Alan Koeneke,*
> Moria*’s creator*



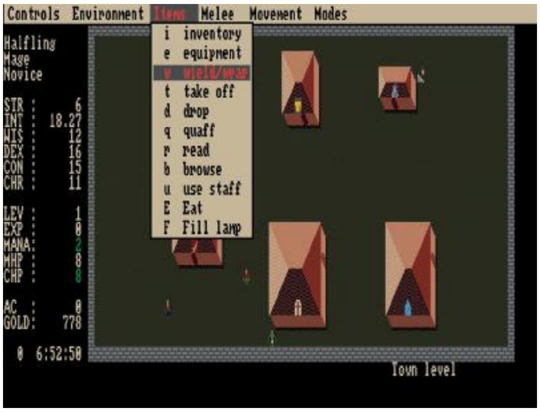
```
(Items b-d, 0-9, ESC to exit) Quaff which potion?_
                                              b) an Indigo Potion.
Dwarf                                         c) a Potion of Slowness.
Warrior                                       d) a Light Blue Potion.
Veteran(2nd)

STR :  18/35
INT :      8
WIS :     11
DEX :     10
CON :  18/26
CHR :      6

LEV :      6
EXP :    153
MANA:      0
MHP :     91
CHP :     17

AC  :      1
GOLD:    281

Hungry                                   Slow          250 feet
```

Surrounded by giant white lice, our desperate dwarf resorts to one of the unidentified potions in his inventory; sadly, it was a potion of slowness

After being abandoned in 1987 by its original creator, Robert Alan Koeneke, the game lived on as *Unix Moria* – or *UMoria* – a port that, thanks to having been written in C, provided new players with the possibility of playing *Moria* on different hardware. (Contrary to what its name suggests, *UMoria* can be played on systems other than Unix, e.g. MS-DOS.) This is by far the most popular version of *Moria* and the one that inspired the creation of games such as *Castle of the Winds*, *Angband* and even *Diablo*.

Nowadays, the popularity of *Moria* and *UMoria* has been far surpassed by derivative titles, especially *Angband* (in fact, the sub-genre of Roguelikes that has been codified by this game is often described as *Angband*-like). While it’s sad that such an important game in the history of CRPGs is being overlooked, it’s easy to see why: *Angband* is extremely faithful to the gameplay and setting (although this time players are tasked with defeating Morgoth) of original *Moria*, while greatly improving and expanding upon it. It’s simply a better game that, while still challenging, won’t scare off less experienced players.

While everyone with an interest in Roguelike games should play a few sessions of *Moria* to experience an important part of the genre’s history, the chances are that more fun will be had with games that descended from it. **MM**

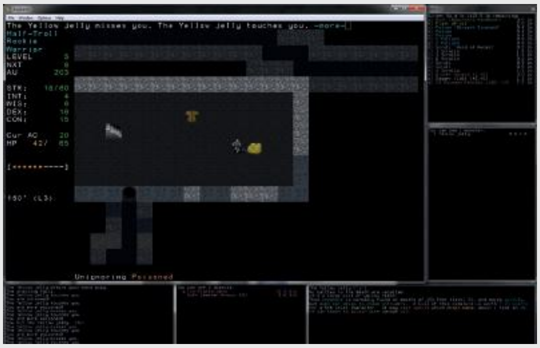


```
Halfling
Mage
Novice

STR :      6
INT :  18.27
WIS :     12
DEX :     16
CON :     15
CHR :     11

LEV :      1
EXP :      0
MANA:      2
MHP :      8
CHP :      8

AC  :      0
GOLD:    778

 0  6:52:50
                          Town level
```

The Amiga version had mouse support and very simple graphics, but both were more confusing than helpful

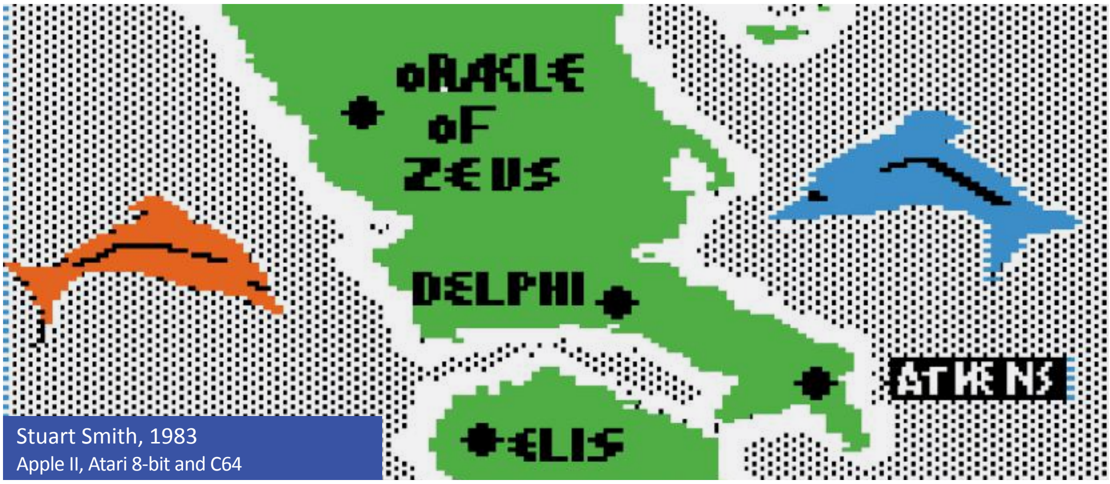
Angband

Angband was first released in 1990 but is still in active development. Its gameplay and visual style are similar to those of *Moria* but it has more enemies (including boss monsters), spells and items, as well as a longer dungeon, while at the same time being more balanced and streamlined. In contrast to *Moria*’s monochrome look, *Angband* gives colours to different enemies, items and HUD elements. It is also notable for ease of modding, as all its data is stored in text files; this has resulted in the creation of numerous variants, such as *ZAngband* and *MAngband*, and helped to popularise the *Moria/Angband* sub-genre of Roguelikes.



Angband allows for tilesets as well as ASCII graphics

The Return of Heracles

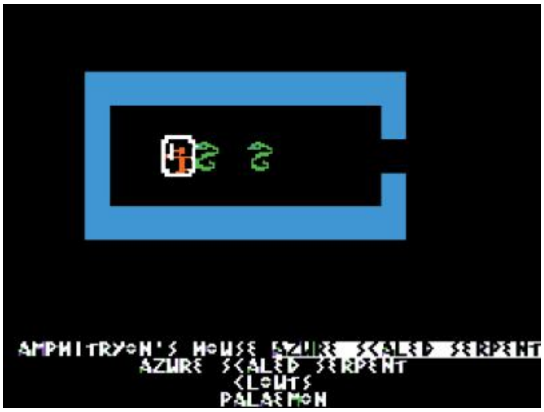


Stuart Smith, 1983
Apple II, Atari 8-bit and C64

Stuart Smith is a somewhat enigmatic figure from early CRPG history. His output was top-notch, reflecting his belief that creating mindless games without educational value was a pointless exercise, which may have led to his seemingly early and permanent exit from the game development world.

His first game was *Fracas* (1980), an early RPG where up to eight players could explore a maze-like city, competing (or cooperating) to see who would complete self-imposed challenges first. A defining feature of *Fracas*, and Smith's subsequent games, is the autonomy that NPCs have: every single creature in the game is unique, and explores the maze just as you do, picking up items, fighting enemies from other factions and eventually even levelling up!

The concept evolved with *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves* (1981), which gave players a more complex dungeon to explore, populated by the 40 thieves, shops, NPCs like Aladdin and other unique creatures. Your goal here is to rescue Princess Buddir-al-Buddoor and, besides the obvious *Arabian Nights* influence, the game also took cues from Tolkien's books and folk tales.



Each of the 19 characters has their own traits: Palaemon, Heracles' original name, begins by facing two snakes sent by Hera, while Odysseus is accompanied by his dog, Argus

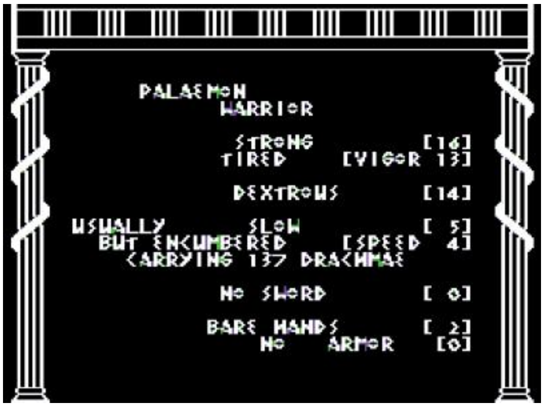
Smith's next game would be more coherent and, for many fans, remain his best. *The Return of Heracles* is so embedded in Greek mythology that it likely falls into the category of "edutainment", but in the same way *The Oregon Trail* does – you virtually have no choice but to learn about myriad (mostly accurate) aspects of Ancient Greek myths, legends and culture.

There is a relatively shocking degree of non-linearity in the game, as you can choose everything from which Greek hero to play (Perseus, Hippolyta, Jason, Achilles, Odysseus, etc.), how many characters you'll control (anywhere from one to all 19 of them) and whether you'll spend your time trying to avoid combat or killing every character you meet.

Some combat is unavoidable, as the purpose of the game – completing the Twelve Labours of Heracles – does necessitate fights such as the traditional slaying of the Hydra and the Nemean Lion. But you are free to try to duck and weave your way around the vast majority of characters, and there are even wholly optional areas in the game.

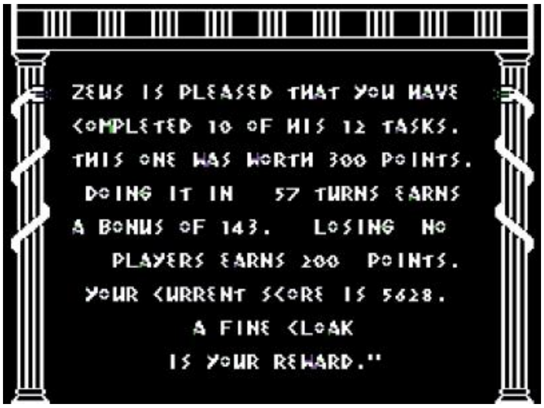
The learning aspect should definitely be emphasised; charming vignettes explain various myths and historical information, and characters come to life even with the hardware limitations of the time. My childhood memories of the tragic figure of Endymion (in myth and, usually, in-game) stayed with me my whole life, and my son's middle name is Endymion almost entirely because of the experiences I had here.

The switching between the overworld maps of Greece and the "interior" maps is fairly innovative for the time, and someone with a passing knowledge of Greek geography and mythology could likely guess where to go for various quests (to some degree) without having to stumble randomly through the game's sizeable world or consult the Oracle of Delphi.



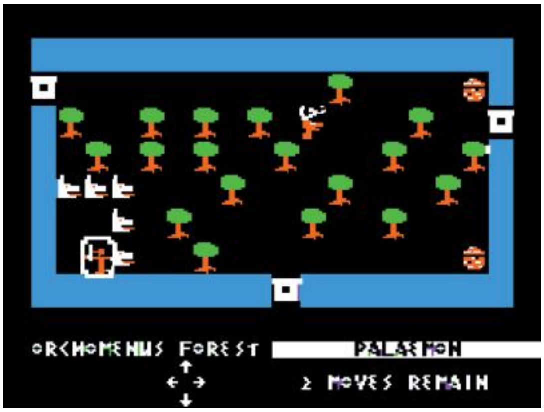
```
PALAEMON
     WARRIOR
          STRONG         [16]
          TIRED    [VIGOR 13]
          DEXTROUS       [14]
USUALLY   SLOW           [ 5]
  BUT ENCUMBERED   [SPEED 4]
   CARRYING 137 DRACHMAE
          NO SWORD       [ 0]
        BARE HANDS       [ 2]
           NO   ARMOR    [0]
```

Each hero has their own stats, which can be improved by training, acquiring new equipment or earning blessings

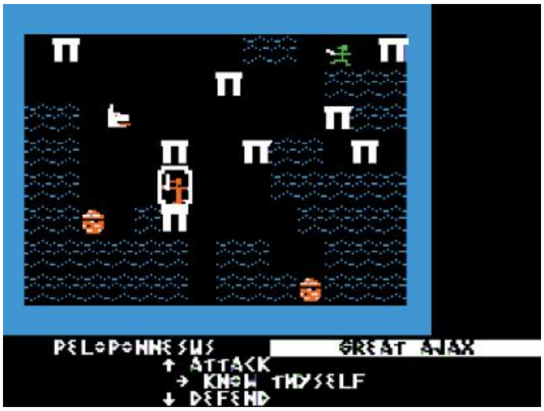


ZEUS IS PLEASED THAT YOU HAVE
COMPLETED 10 OF HIS 12 TASKS.
THIS ONE WAS WORTH 300 POINTS.
DOING IT IN 57 TURNS EARNS
A BONUS OF 143. LOSING NO
PLAYERS EARNS 200 POINTS.
YOUR CURRENT SCORE IS 5628.
A FINE CLOAK
IS YOUR REWARD."

The score system greatly increases the game's replayability, with players still competing for high scores and speedruns



Knowledge of Greek myths is vital to avoid certain deaths, such as being cursed and then devoured by Actaeon's dogs



For all its complexity, the game is extremely easy to play: all you need are the four arrow keys, Space and Enter

But make no mistake, the role-playing adventure aspects of the game are fabulous for the era as well. The time limit of 200 turns per quest keeps the game fast and intense, while random elements like roaming NPCs and the whim of the gods (climbing Olympus might earn you either a gift or a curse) keeps every playthrough fresh. There is a solid economy which enforces tough choices as the monetary resources are (mostly) finite. Thus, the more characters you have, the more difficult it becomes to properly equip them.

Minimal-character "speedruns" are evidently popular within the retro community but, if you do choose to take the full panoply of characters, then it can be heartbreaking when your nearly-naked characters succumb to the hordes in the Trojan War segment.

Compared to today's 100-hour RPGs, it's amazing how *The Return of Heracles* throws virtually the entire "greatest hits" of Greek mythology at you rapid-fire, one screen after another. Certainly any game where you can obtain the Golden Fleece, triumphantly board the Trojan Horse, and climb Mount Olympus in the span of a few minutes does not lack in action.

Speaking to other aspects of immersion, the relatively minimal amount of sound in the game is implemented so well that it remains striking even today. There are ambient sounds of crashing waves in maritime scenes, sounds of gates opening and closing, and distinctive tones indicating the amount of damage done by an attack, from a barely-audible glancing blow to a bass-heavy deathblow dirge. The musical score is easy to call masterful for the time, as the few songs are all excellently memorable and thematically appropriate.

Overall, *The Return of Heracles* stands out for the sheer amount of entertainment stuffed into it, particularly given its age. The only real competition in 1983 were the third releases from *Wizardry* and *Ultima*. But *Wizardry* was never meant to be a similar sort of game, and it would be another two years before Lord British refined his own technique and released a CRPG with the kind of narrative depth and resonance that Stuart Smith had already mastered – although Smith did have the advantage of using stories that had already been honed for thousands of years. **QX**

Ultima III: Exodus

Ultima III
by Lord British
COPYRIGHT (C) 1983 ORIGIN SYSTEMS

Origin Systems, 1983
Apple II, MS-DOS, C64, Amiga, NES, etc.

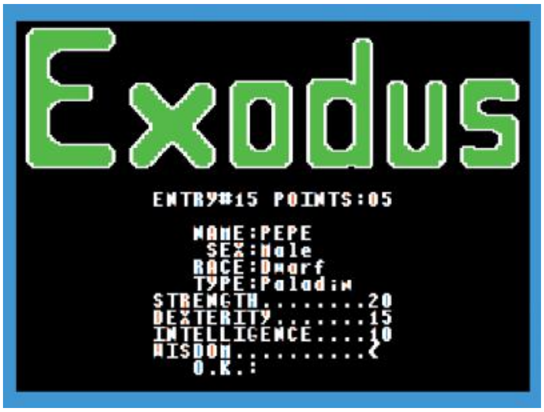
Those who wish to play *Exodus* can try the MS-DOS version with the *Ultima 3 Upgrade* mod, which adds VGA graphics, MIDI sound and many other cool improvements.

Ultima III is an important departure from its predecessors, allowing players to control a party of adventurers for the first time in the series. The enemy you face is also one of the strangest in gaming history: the half-demon, half-machine offspring of Mondain and Minax, called Exodus.

This creature threatens Sosaria, requiring you to return to the setting of *Ultima I*, though my advice to you is not to get too attached to the place.

One of the reasons Richard Garriott has a great reputation as a programmer is how well he handled technical improvements from game to game. While the *Wizardry* series saw small incremental changes through the first five games of the series, the transition from *Akalabeth*, *Ultima I*, *Ultima II*, and then *Ultima III* is startling, especially knowing that each of these games was coded by the same person.

Once more, the geographic area was expanded from the previous game. In sound, the game made another impressive jump with more rhythmic tunes that changed depending on the party's game location, which strongly pushed the mood.



```
ENTRY#15 POINTS:05

    NAME:PEPE
     SEX:Male
    RACE:Dwarf
    TYPE:Paladin
STRENGTH.........20
DEXTERITY........15
INTELLIGENCE.....10
WISDOM...........
    O.K.:
```

You start *Exodus* by creating four characters for your party; it's the only *Ultima* to allow this, and the last one to feature fantasy races like Elves and Bobbits

In the previous two games, combat was simply a matter of attacking a foe standing in front of you, but *Ultima III* moves all battles to a separate, tactical combat map. Now you must carefully consider the position and movement of all your characters, greatly expanding your options in combat. On top of this, the game also adds new character races, classes and different spell groups for Wizards and Clerics.

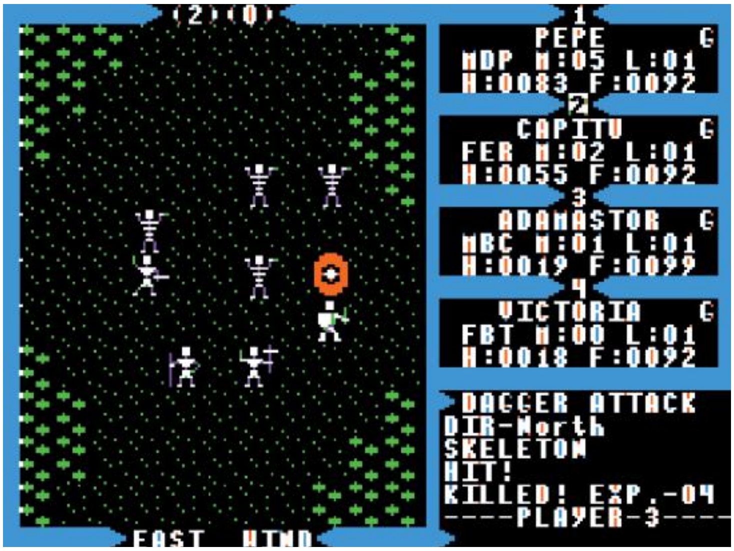
Outside combat, the game is also much tighter. The space battles and most sci-fi elements of *Ultima I* and *II* were removed, and talking to NPCs is more important now, as conversation trees were added. The game also packs a twist, with a final encounter that requires more puzzle-solving than combat.

Although a cloth map was once again included with the game box, a new continent that could be found off the map was made available, adding a sense of wonder. The same could be said for a secret spell that was not included in the manual and required puzzle-solving and exploration to discover. The time gates of *Ultima II* were back, now officially called Moongates, and allowed travel dependent on the phases of the planet's twin moons.

Garriott felt that allowing the character to interact with his or her surroundings was vital to the CRPG experience, so he sought to improve upon the things that one could do. Players could pick up more objects and manipulate them on the screen, allowing for improved puzzle design and problem-solving.

Of course, all of these improvements would be the result of brand-new programming code. Garriott had left Sierra On-Line after *Ultima II* was published, claiming that they stopped paying him his royalties, and started his own game company – Origin Systems. If his fledgling creation was to survive, then *Ultima III* would have to be a hit.

> “Once I published *Ultima III* suddenly a large number of people wrote to the company, and I began to see exactly what people thought of the game. They would often describe how they would play the game. As I quickly realised, people were playing completely differently than I thought – they were min-maxing for power, versus role-playing as the hero. It was really eye-opening.”
>
> *– Richard Garriott,*
> Ultima III*’s creator*



```
(2)(0)
1
PEPE           G
MDP M:05 L:01
H:0083 F:0092
2
CAPITU         G
FER M:02 L:01
H:0055 F:0092
3
ADAMASTOR      G
MBC M:01 L:01
H:0019 F:0099
4
VICTORIA       G
FBT M:00 L:01
H:0018 F:0092
DAGGER ATTACK
DIR-North
SKELETON
HIT!
KILLED! EXP.-04
----PLAYER-3----
EAST WIND
```

While obscure CRPG *Tunnels of Doom* (1982) pioneered tactical party-based and turn-based combat, it was *Ultima III* that popularised this feature

Luckily, his hard work and brand-new code were successful enough to sell over a hundred thousand copies of *Exodus*, resulting in Origin’s continued survival and the game receiving a Gold Award from the Software Publisher’s Association.

A transition piece, *Exodus*’ game design feels much closer to *Ultima IV* than *Ultima II*, but the game is narratively tied to its predecessors. This is the last we’ll see of Sosaria, and the last we’ll see of some of the character classes and races we were able to play in the previous games. *Exodus* ends with a cataclysmic event that will reshape the world into Britannia and destroy the social order of those who survive.

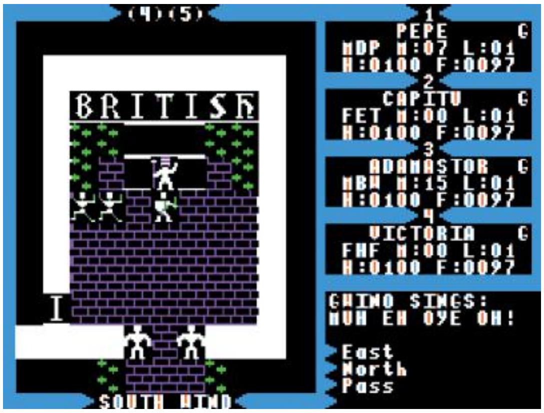
We’ll still see some familiar locations in future games, such as Britain and Yew, but this is goodbye to places like Grey and Monitor. Remnants of Sosaria will be brought up in future games, but I can’t help but wonder what the series would have been like if Garriott had kept them in his future games.

Ultima III would have a deep, lasting influence, popularising tactical party- and turn-based combat among Western developers – which would later be expanded by *Wizard’s Crown* (1985), *Pool of Radiance* (1988) and many others.

And it would also be a hit in Japan. The previous *Ultima* games were ported to Japanese computers, inspiring games like 夢幻の心臓 (*Heart of Fantasy*, 1984), but *Exodus* was the first game of the series to be ported to Nintendo’s NES/Famicom consoles. This port, released a few months after *Dragon Quest* (1986) had redefined JRPGs, was the first Western RPG for many Japanese developers, as well as many console gamers across the world.

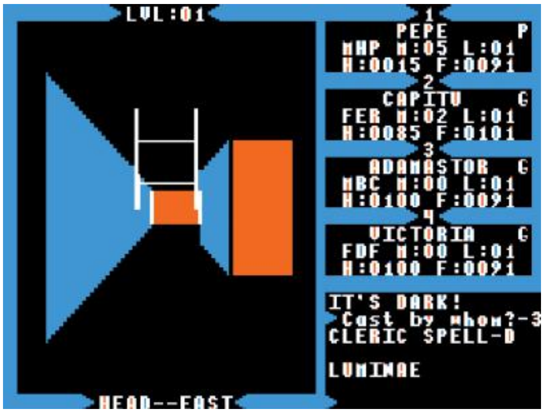
While not as much fun as some of the games that would come after, this is where the series really began to kick off, and I would still recommend *Ultima III* to fans of old PC games and those that enjoy experiencing the origins of important RPG series. **DT**

Players who beat the game were told to send a letter to Origin reporting their deeds. In return, they would get a completion certificate, signed by Lord British himself. This tradition would continue up to *Ultima VIII* (1994).



```
(4)(5)
1
PEPE           G
MDP M:07 L:01
H:0100 F:0097
2
CAPITU         G
FET M:00 L:01
H:0100 F:0097
3
ADAMASTOR      G
MBW M:15 L:01
H:0100 F:0097
4
VICTORIA       G
FHF M:00 L:01
H:0100 F:0097
GWINO SINGS:
HUH EH OYE OH!

East
North
Pass
SOUTH WIND
```

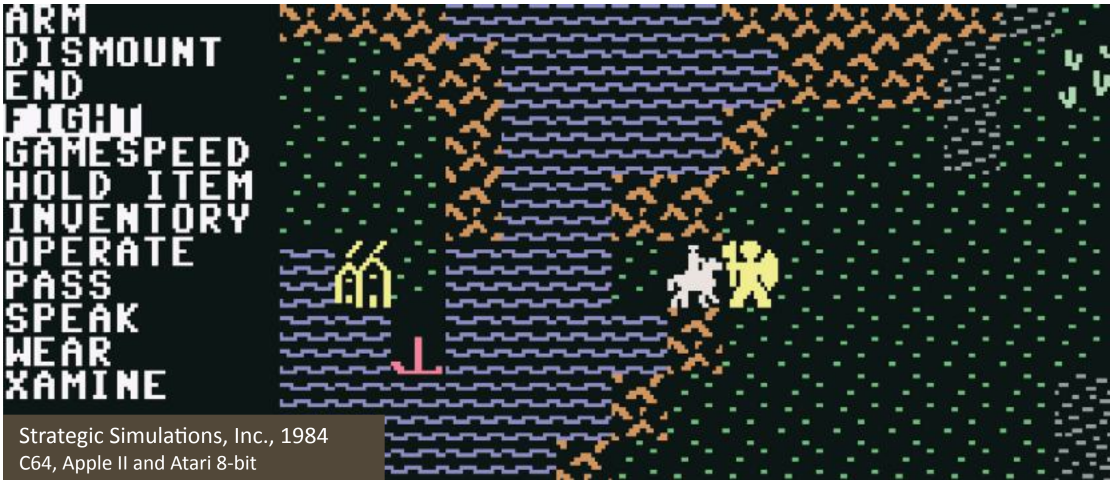
Ultima III added a line-of-sight system, so walls, doors, forests and mountains all affect how far you can see



```
LVL:01
1
PEPE           P
MHP M:05 L:01
H:0015 F:0091
2
CAPITU         G
FER M:02 L:01
H:0085 F:0101
3
ADAMASTOR      G
MBC M:00 L:01
H:0100 F:0091
4
VICTORIA       G
FDF M:00 L:01
H:0100 F:0091
IT'S DARK!
 Cast by whom?-3
CLERIC SPELL-D

LUMINAE
HEAD--EAST
```

Dungeons now have solid-colour walls, while encounters are sparser and fought in the tactical combat view

Questron



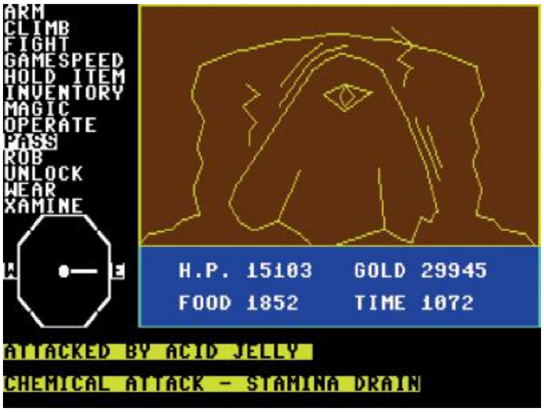
Strategic Simulations, Inc., 1984
C64, Apple II and Atari 8-bit

***Questron* was SSI's first published RPG. It became a hit, surpassing all the strategy games the company was known for.**

The early years of CRPG history showcase a wide variety of game styles, all looking and playing quite differently. It was a new frontier: there were no standards for how an RPG – or any game, really – should play on the computer. Some developers brought ideas from the PLATO RPGs, but most stories are about programmers who bought an Apple II and tried to make a game on it, using their favourite tabletop RPGs, books and movies as reference.

Questron is different. It was born when Charles Dougherty played *Ultima I* and fell in love with it. He had never played an RPG before, but he was a skilled programmer, so he decided to see if he could make his own game – based on the only RPG he knew.

When the game was done, he sent it to publishers, hoping for a deal. Brøderbund began displaying the game at conventions, and in one of those Richard Garriott happened to pass by and complained about how similar the game was to *Ultima*. Brøderbund gave up on publishing it, but Strategic Simulations Inc. (SSI) wanted to get into the CRPG market and decided to strike a deal with Garriott.



H.P. 15103 GOLD 29945
FOOD 1852 TIME 1072

ATTACKED BY ACID JELLY
CHEMICAL ATTACK - STAMINA DRAIN

Once you arrive at the Land of Evil, you'll be able to explore first-person dungeons; while most RPGs used straight wire-frames, *Questron*'s dungeons are more cave-like

And so, after a few changes, *Questron* was released in 1984, featuring a disclaimer: "Game structure and style used under licence of Richard Garriott".

It sounds a bit mean today, considering how often popular titles are copied, and that the following years saw dozens of RPGs heavily inspired by *Ultima,* like *Shards of Spring*, *2400 A.D.*, *Magic Candle*, *Deathlord*, *Dragon Quest*, *Exile*, etc. But *Questron* was the first, and it is indeed extremely similar to *Ultima I and II*.

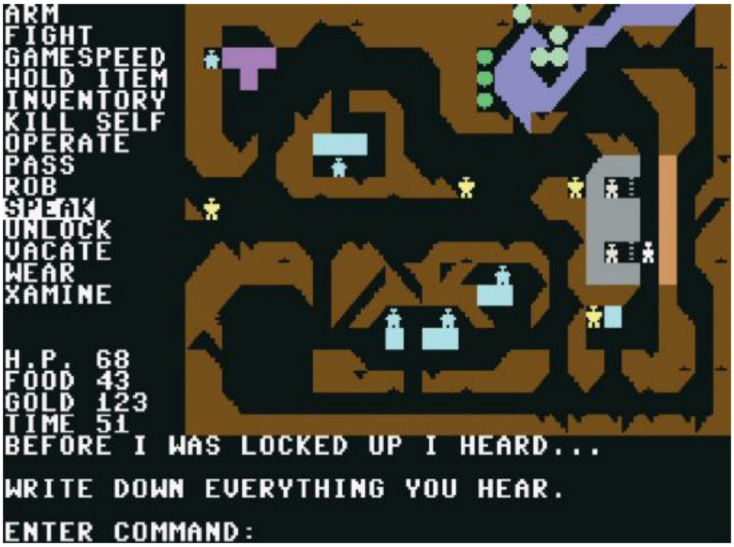
There's no character creation; you simply type a name and spawn on the game's massive open world. Your first goal is to gather gold and grow stronger, buying weapons and armour in the various towns, and visiting cathedrals to increase your HP.

Questron has no XP system; to improve your stats you must pay to play mini-games, e.g. skeet-shooting will slowly increase your Dexterity. While quite original, this means that fighting monsters is mostly pointless – it yields little gold and no XP, and will drain your HP. You're better off gambling in town, playing blackjack or roulette. Not very heroic.

Once you're rich and powerful enough, the king will summon you. You'll be tasked with travelling to the Land of Evil, where you must defeat the evil wizard. This new land is another large continent, but it features more dangerous enemies, a few first-person dungeons and a giant eagle you can mount to fly around.

While the journey has few innovations, *Questron*'s ending was revolutionary. Today we expect extensive cutscenes that will bring closure to our adventures, but, back in the day, games would just say "You Won!" and shut down. *Questron* was the first CRPG – and possibly the first videogame – that rewarded you with a long animated victory ceremony, with trumpeters announcing your arrival, the king appointing you Baron and even some sequel-teasing.

> "One of my regrets was never calling Richard [Garriott] to talk about it [the similarities with *Ultima*]. But, bear in mind he was a big name, I was a nobody living disconnected in the Midwest, and Brøderbund and SSI were telling me that he was pissed. I had no idea what to say to him."
>
> – *Chuck Dougherty,* Questron*'s co-creator*



H.P. 68
FOOD 43
GOLD 123
TIME 51

BEFORE I WAS LOCKED UP I HEARD...

WRITE DOWN EVERYTHING YOU HEAR.

ENTER COMMAND:

A town with four shops, a casino and a jail. I bribed the guard to let me speak with the prisoner, who is giving me some hints. As in *Ultima*, the shop's inventory is time-based, with new items becoming available over time.

Questron became a best-selling hit, so Charles and his twin brother, John, founded Quest Software and made their second game, *Legacy of the Ancients* (1987). It features an updated engine, with large towns, better graphics and an item durability system, but follows a very similar formula to *Questron*'s, whereby you must earn gold by gambling or fighting, then raise your stats in mini-games until you can defeat the evil bad guy.

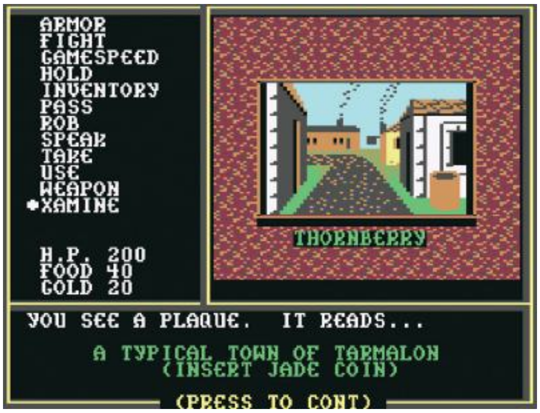
However, *Legacy* had a unique hook: you start the game inside a Galactic Museum, where the exhibits are magical – they may teleport you to a city or secret dungeon, or grant an item or stat boost. To interact with them you need special coins, which must be found by exploring. The game still doesn't use XP; instead you must do quests for the museum's caretaker, who will grant you levels and unlock new areas of the museum.

After releasing *Legacy* with Electronic Arts, the brothers partnered again with SSI, who assigned Westwood Studios to help them create *Questron II*.

Released in 1988, *Questron II* had fancy new graphics, but was basically a remake of *Questron I* – the same single-character RPG based around getting gold to raise stats and then doing a lot of backtracking. Lacking the novelty of *Legacy*'s Galactic Museum, this primitive gameplay had little to offer next to big 1988 titles like *Wasteland*, *Ultima V* and *Pool of Radiance*.

The brothers still made one more game in 1988, *The Legend of Blacksilver*. It mixes the best of *Questron* and *Legacy* in a polished package, but it's ultimately more of the same. Furthermore, its publisher, Epyx, went bankrupt and failed to properly promote the game, so the twins decided to retire from game development.

It's an interesting story. Neither Charles nor John had any previous experience with RPGs – they simply loved *Ultima* and decided to make games like it. This led to several iterations of the same concept, but unfortunately it all fell apart when they failed to move on as times changed. **FE**



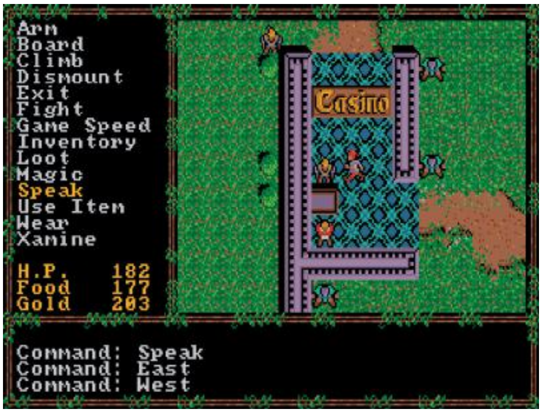
H.P. 200
FOOD 40
GOLD 20

YOU SEE A PLAQUE. IT READS...

A TYPICAL TOWN OF TARMALON
(INSERT JADE COIN)

(PRESS TO CONT)

Legacy of the Ancients features an iconic Galactic Museum, where you can use exhibitions as gates to faraway lands

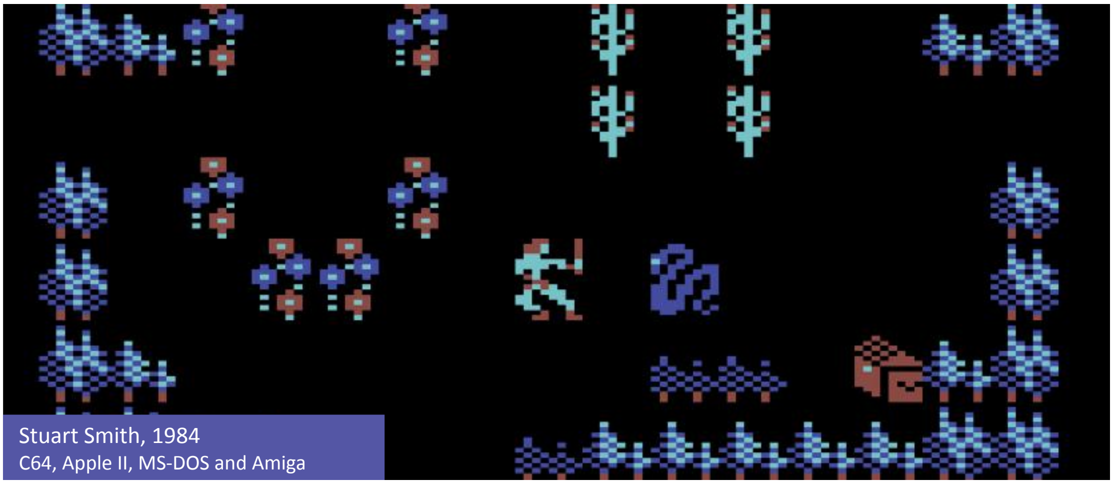


H.P. 182
Food 177
Gold 203

Command: Speak
Command: East
Command: West

Questron II's graphics were improved, but the gameplay felt simplistic next to that of games like *Ultima V* and *Wasteland*

Adventure Construction Set



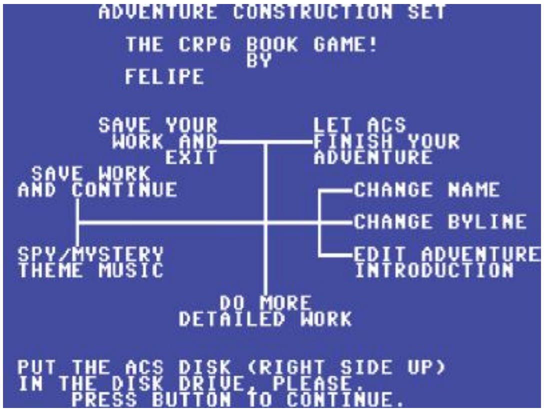
Stuart Smith, 1984
C64, Apple II, MS-DOS and Amiga

ACS was published by Electronic Arts. In 1985 they organized a game design contest, offering $1,000 for the three best games created with _ACS_.

Stuart Smith's *Adventure Construction Set* (*ACS*) was one of the first commercially-available RPG construction utilities. The author, Stuart Smith, previously created three other CRPGs: *Fracas* (1980), *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves* (1981) and *The Return of Heracles* (1983). These were similar tile-based games with simple sprite graphics but challenging gameplay.

Included with the construction kit are pre-made scenarios available for the player to enjoy as regular games or to take apart to discover how game creation works. There is the impressive *Rivers of Light*, which is a full game set in Egypt and based on the ancient Epic of Gilgamesh, as well as some other minor scenarios depending on the game's version, such as *The Land of Aventuria,* a "How to Play" adventure that is simple yet informative and highlights the game design options.

You'll notice the game is called *Adventure Construction Set* and not "RPG Construction Set". Genres weren't as strictly defined back then, and the tool can indeed be used to create many types of game, offering templates and effects for fantasy stories, science fiction adventures and modern spy capers.



```
ADVENTURE CONSTRUCTION SET
    THE CRPG BOOK GAME!
                BY
    FELIPE

SAVE YOUR WORK AND EXIT          LET ACS FINISH YOUR ADVENTURE
SAVE WORK AND CONTINUE
                                 CHANGE NAME
                                 CHANGE BYLINE
SPY/MYSTERY THEME MUSIC          EDIT ADVENTURE INTRODUCTION
            DO MORE DETAILED WORK

PUT THE ACS DISK (RIGHT SIDE UP)
IN THE DISK DRIVE, PLEASE.
    PRESS BUTTON TO CONTINUE.
```

The toolset uses several menus to fine-tune each aspect of the game, but they require constant disk-swapping and have extremely long load times

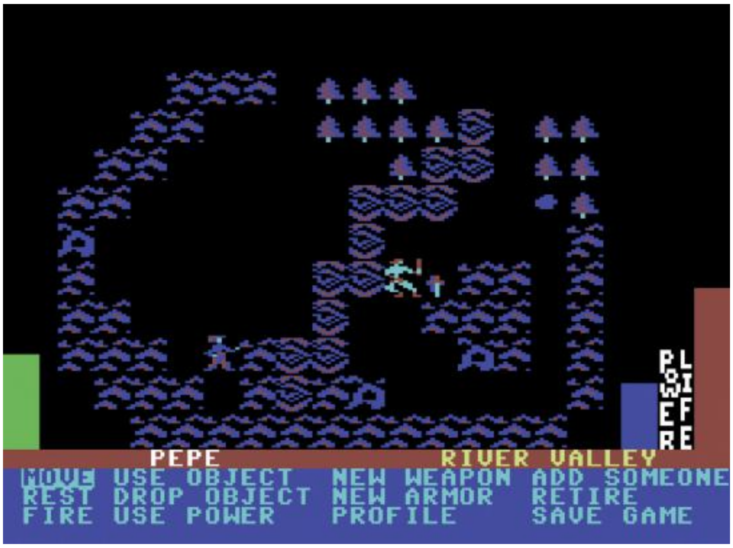
The game has stats such as strength, constitution, dexterity, speed and wisdom, and skills such as armour, melee, missile, dodge and parry. While stats and skills are hard-coded, making it impossible to remove them or add new ones, items and spells can be freely edited, allowing you to design a scenario that offers Kevlar vests and fireballs, or plate mail and pistols.

You start by choosing one of the provided adventures or by designing your own. The player then selects a name and portrait for their character and the game moves to an overhead map. The player's interaction with the world is relative to their ability scores and equipment. A character with a higher strength can carry more, while one with high wisdom has a bigger spell-casting pool. As in 1988's *Wasteland*, some stats can be increased by using them, rather than by adding points when the player levels up.

Gameplay in *ACS* consists of a hybrid of turn-based movement and combat with a real-time clock. This is a unique system, found in few other games to this day. The player is given a number of movement points per turn based on their speed attribute. They can move multiple squares, or make multiple attacks, but the movement points are constantly ticking down. If the player doesn't act quickly, it's the monster's turn, and it may not end well for the player.

Not so amazing is the *ACS* implementation of multiplayer, which follows a hot-seat approach. Up to four players can take part in an adventure by creating their own characters and alternating turns using the same joystick. A novel addition, but not so spectacular in execution due to limited interactivity between players. This feature does prove critical at least at one point in the game *Rivers of Light,* in which the creation of a second adventurer is a must in order to solve a particular puzzle and advance the story.

> "Before doing games, I wrote accounting software. As that got repetitive, I decided to 'replace myself'. I wrote and sold a product called *Quick and Clean* that would use a file definition and a brief description of a report to generate a COBOL program that would produce the report. The generated program no longer required *Quick and Clean* to run, and could be modified as desired by the company's programmers. [...] So, making a game that wrote games (sort of) came from those previous ideas."
>
> *– Stuart Smith,*
> Adventure Construction Set*'s creator*



The green bar shows how many moves you have; during your turn, the green bar decreases when you move or act, but also slowly goes down over time, forcing you to act quickly

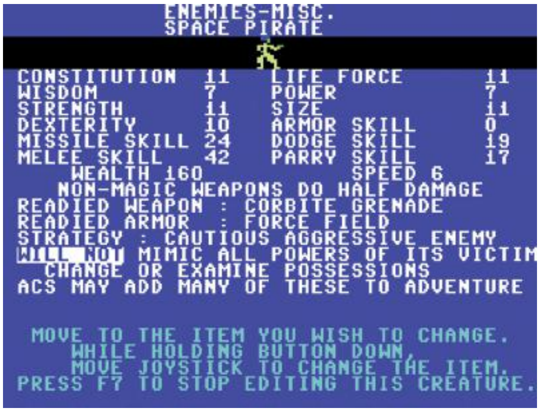
A cornerstone of *ACS* is creating your own game. Scenario development is made by first building a world map made up of player-defined regions, which are places the player may enter on the map. A region could be a cave, a city, or a dungeon. Each of these regions is made up of rooms, which in turn contain objects such as enemies, NPCs, shops and items. Items could be furniture, equipment, scrolls or triggers. Triggers are fired off once the player walks over the object or simply enters the room.

You can also edit the tiles pixel by pixel to create your own unique custom map and characters. NPCs as well as monsters can have their AI altered to either help the player, attack, be neutral, or even to steal items on the screen and make a break for it. Your custom scenarios could be shared with others so they could experience your dream game. Another innovation was that the *ACS* engine could automatically complete a scenario design on its own.

Overall, *ACS* is an ambitious game with a great amount of innovation, which was held in check by technical limitations and dated graphics (even for 1984!) *ACS* did succeed in placing the ability to create a CRPG or adventure in a gamer's hands. No coding was required to build your vision. You could create a tile-based game, design the tiles, choose the music, and add NPC interaction. The included adventures such as *Rivers of Light* are made with the same tools the player has, and can be taken apart and modified using the same editor players will use to construct their own adventures.

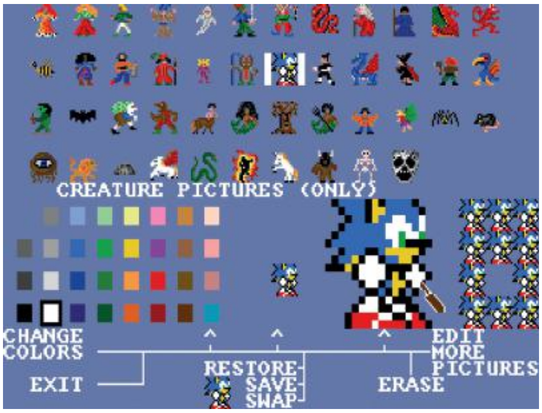
For all the innovation, the trade-off was the excruciatingly time-consuming task of creating a fully-fledged game, given the amount of disk access and swapping required. Those wishing to try *Adventure Construction Set* are encouraged to play the Commodore Amiga version, as it has the best graphics and sound, and the least disk swapping. **DAE**

Bethesda's *Elder Scrolls Construction Set* was inspired by Stuart Smith's tool, with Todd Howard choosing the same name as a homage. The tool also inspired *Doom's* John Romero, who did a podcast interview with Stuart Smith in 2020.



```
             ENEMIES-MISC.
             SPACE PIRATE

CONSTITUTION  11    LIFE FORCE      11
WISDOM         7    POWER            7
STRENGTH      11    SIZE            11
DEXTERITY     10    ARMOR SKILL      0
MISSILE SKILL 24    DODGE SKILL     19
MELEE SKILL   42    PARRY SKILL     17
    WEALTH 160            SPEED 6
   NON-MAGIC WEAPONS DO HALF DAMAGE
READIED WEAPON : CORBITE GRENADE
READIED ARMOR  : FORCE FIELD
STRATEGY : CAUTIOUS AGGRESSIVE ENEMY
WILL NOT MIMIC ALL POWERS OF ITS VICTIM
  CHANGE OR EXAMINE POSSESSIONS
ACS MAY ADD MANY OF THESE TO ADVENTURE

 MOVE TO THE ITEM YOU WISH TO CHANGE.
    WHILE HOLDING BUTTON DOWN,
    MOVE JOYSTICK TO CHANGE THE ITEM.
PRESS F7 TO STOP EDITING THIS CREATURE.
```

Enemies, items, spells and terrain can all be customised; you can also set parameters for the toolset to auto-generate the game



The Amiga version, released in 1986, added mouse support and better graphics, with 32 colours instead of the original's four

1985-1989: Here come the new challengers

After the crash of 1983, videogame consoles had become a dirty word in the US – neither retailers nor parents were willing to spend money on one. But where such people saw a dead fad, SEGA and Nintendo saw an opportunity to cross the seas and conquer a new market.

Nintendo's solution was to sell its Famicom console not as a videogame console, but as a toy – a "Nintendo Entertainment System" (a.k.a. NES), bundled with a Zapper Light Gun and ROB, a plastic robot that would assist players in some games (and was quickly abandoned after release).

Still, Nintendo's masterstroke was the "Nintendo Seal of Quality", the company's answer to the countless bad games that flooded the market. Now Nintendo guaranteed the quality of each game they published, and a lockout chip prevented other companies from releasing unlicensed NES games. This would reshape the console industry, with developers now being forced to sign publishing deals with console companies.

In Europe, home computers like the Amstrad CPC, ZX Spectrum and Commodore 64 still dominated the videogame market, thanks to their versatility and lower cost: their games came on cassette tapes that were much cheaper than a console cartridge, and could be easily copied. And they were about to get an upgrade, as a new generation of personal computers arrived, led by the Commodore Amiga and the Atari ST.

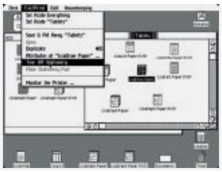
These brought in massive improvements in performance, audio and graphics, but the outstanding revolution was the adoption of the mouse and Graphical User Interfaces. This allowed home computers to become more intuitive and accessible, as even a child could drag the mouse across the screen to click on objects and icons.

The IBM PC-Compatibles remained the biggest platform worldwide, but they also faced several changes. In 1985, Intel released its i386 processor and Compaq quickly incorporated it into its DeskPro 386, gaining market share by producing an IBM clone more advanced than IBM's own machines. IBM tried to recover its throne with the PS2 family in 1987. It was an innovative machine, with an all-new operating system (*OS/2*), new ports and a new VGA graphics card that allowed it to rival the Amiga and ST. However, IBM doomed itself by trying to enforce a proprietary architecture in order to regain control over the clones. Simply put, IBM's new machine wasn't IBM PC-Compatible. It faced severe backlash and only further increased the dominance of clones, who managed to replicate its features without relying on IBM.

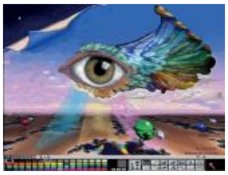
Overall, the second half of the '80s brought in a wave of innovation that revitalised the whole industry, setting the foundations for the creative explosion that would follow in the '90s.

Trends:

Graphical User Interface: People often mistakenly believe that before *Windows 95* the only operating system computers had were black DOS screens, but the Xerox Alto, created in 1973, already had a mouse and a graphical operating system. The Apple Lisa popularised the concept in 1983 and soon every big company followed suit. The Amiga, Atari ST and Macintosh all had their own graphical operating systems with mouse support, while IBM PCs could use *OS/2, GEOS, GEM* or Microsoft's original *Windows*, from 1985.


Apple's Lisa already had its own graphical interface in 1983, with mouse support, multiple windows and drag-down menus

Graphic Modes: One of the most noticeable advances of the new generation of computers was the graphics. Previously, most computers could only handle up to 16 colours, but now 64 colours became the standard, and special modes like the Amiga's HAM rendered up to 4096 colours at once. IBM PC-Compatibles relied on CGA cards, which allowed only 4 colours. In 1984, EGA cards raised that to 16 colours, and in 1987 the VGA cards pushed it to 256 colours, finally standing up to the Amiga, Apple IIGS and Atari ST.


An image created on Amiga's *Photon Paint*, using the machine's 4096 colours at once

Sound Cards: Early computers could produce no sounds other than a few beeps. Dedicated sound cards were first created as tools for professional musicians, with later machines like the Amiga and Atari ST offering built-in audio chips. IBM PCs were left behind until 1987, when the AdLib sound card arrived, followed by the Sound Blaster, the Roland MT-32 sound module and many others. Sound cards would be a competitive business until the mid '90s, when they began to be replaced by built-in audio chips.

Score: 226 of 230 KQIV The Perils of Rosella
King's Quest IV was released in 1988 and was the first game to support IBM PC sound cards

The **Commodore Amiga** family begins with the Amiga 1000, an accessible home computer with cutting-edge CPU, graphics and sound.

The **Nintendo Entertainment System** arrives in the US. A cultural phenomenon, it reignited game consoles and sold over 60 million units.

The **Apple IIGS** is released. Apple's answer to the Amiga and Atari ST, it was cheaper and ran Apple II software, but was slow and outdated.

SimCity
The City Simulator
SimCity is released. Selling over one million copies, it expanded the horizon of videogames beyond combat and epic adventures.

The **Genesis/Mega Drive** is released. SEGA's biggest success and the eternal rival to the Super Nintendo, it sold over 30 million units.

1985 1986 1987 1988 1989

The **Atari ST** family is launched. A cheaper alternative to the Amiga, it was also the first computer with a coloured GUI. Its built-in MIDI ports made it very popular with musicians.

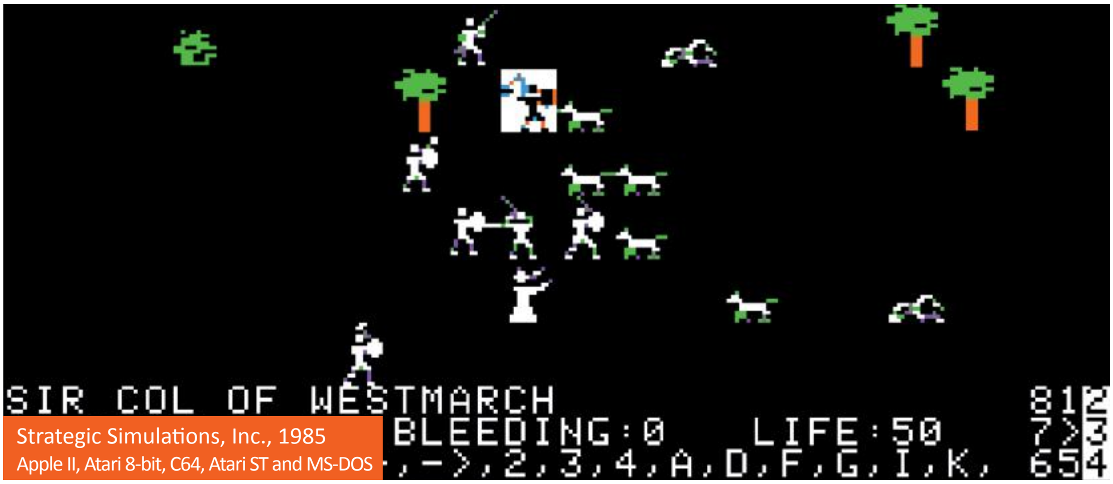
SEGA's **Master System** arrives in the West. While technologically superior to the NES, it suffered from a smaller game library. It sold over 10 million units at the time, being very successful in Europe and Brazil.

Dragon Quest is released in Japan for the Famicom. Blending *Wizardry* with *Ultima* and Akira Toriyama's unique art style, it defined JRPGs and sold over 2 million copies.

The **IBM PS/2** was IBM's attempt to regain control of the PC clones market. Although it did introduce several innovations, it was heavily criticised for its closed architecture.

The **Game Boy** is released. While it faced competition from handhelds like the Atari Lynx and SEGA Game Gear, its low price and excellent games made it the victor, selling over 118 million units.

Wizard's Crown



```
SIR COL OF WESTMARCH                 812
           BLEEDING:0    LIFE:50     7>3
,->,2,3,4,A,D,F,G,I,K,               654
```

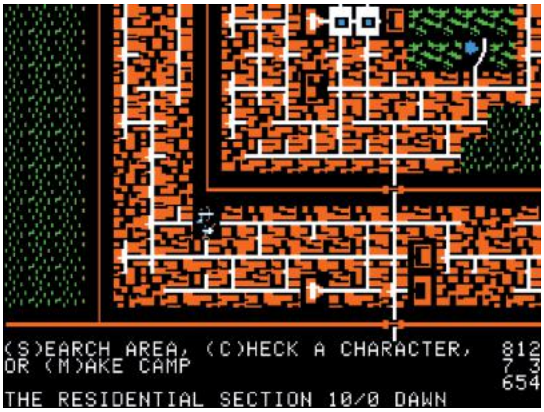
Strategic Simulations, Inc., 1985
Apple II, Atari 8-bit, C64, Atari ST and MS-DOS

Wizard's Crown is a turn-based, tactical CRPG created by my favourite gaming company of all time, SSI. The backstory is simplistic, involving a ravaged land, crazed wizard evil guy, and a McGuffin held by said wizard. The player puts a team of eight heroes together, has them explore their surroundings, and eventually gathers enough skill and special equipment to kill the evil wizard and take his crown back home.

While SSI had published RPGs before, *Wizard's Crown* was the first one created by their internal team, a group of wargaming veterans led by Paul Murray and Keith Brors, who would later create the Gold Box series

The game features five classes – Warrior, Thief, Priest, Ranger and Sorcerer – but character creation is done through a point-buy system, allowing you to customise a character's stats and skills. Thus, you can create a powerful pure warrior who excels as a sword and shield fighter, but the system also allows for multi-class characters, such as a lightly armoured Ranger/Priest with some points in healing in order to complement the party's dedicated Priest.

Characters never level up, but instead earn more skill points, which can be used to improve their use of a particular sort of weapon, block with a shield, identify items, cast spells, etc.



```
(S)EARCH AREA, (C)HECK A CHARACTER,  812
OR (M)AKE CAMP                       7 3
                                     654
THE RESIDENTIAL SECTION 10/0 DAWN
```

The city offers some shops and taverns, but most of your time will be spent in the ruins next to it, trying to find new locations and fighting in random encounters

The entire game takes place in a very limited area, consisting only of a crime-ridden half of a city, bandit-filled woods north of the city, and the ruined remnants of the second half of the city to the south.

Overworld movement is done from a 2D top-down perspective through a map of grid squares, though the party can enter certain structures and shops. When the party enters a building or dungeon that requires exploration, it is brought into another map. Non-combat skills become important, as there are often locked doors and secrets to discover.

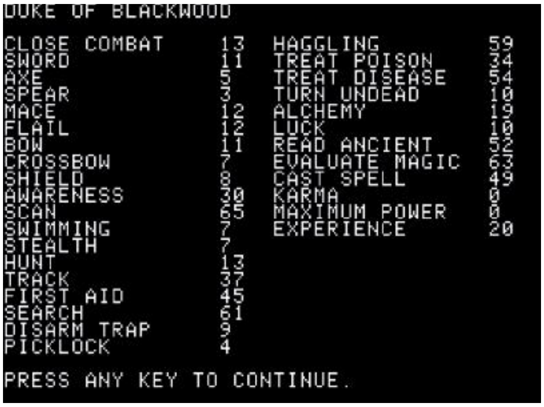
Similarly, when the party encounters enemies the game goes to a combat map, complete with walls and furniture that affect movement and line of fire.

Combat is really where this game shines. Here you can see the sort of design choices that would later come into play in the famous Gold Box series, which SSI began in 1988 with *Pool of Radiance*.

You start battles by positioning your heroes, and the direction a combatant faces is important, as defensive values are better against frontal attacks, while attacks from behind are more devastating.

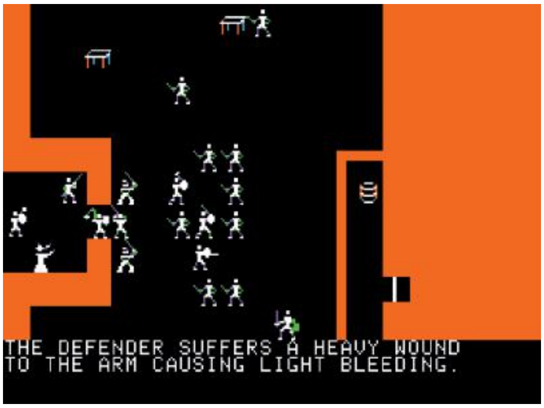
Once combat begins, there's an outstanding number of actions available. Characters can go prone or zig-zag to avoid arrows, sacrifice defence for a more reckless attack, spend an entire turn aiming their bow, break shields with axes, guard against approaching enemies, hide, etc. Besides hit points, there's also a detailed injury system, and unconscious companions can die by bleeding out unless one of your characters stabilises them. Furthermore, if a battle takes too long, morale starts to drop, making it harder.

Wizard's Crown is by far the most tactical RPG of its time – battles are an elegant dance, with forward lines of soldiers protecting allied archers and spellcasters, while supporting healers run between.



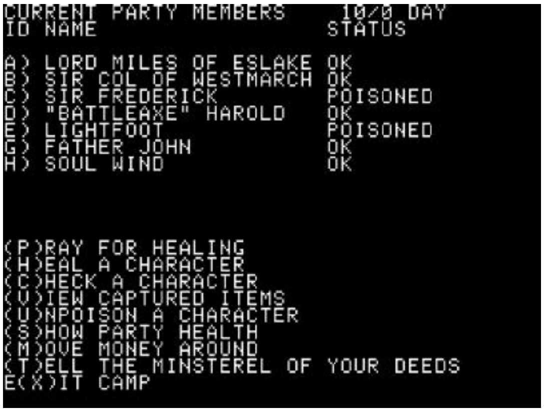
```
DUKE OF BLACKWOOD

CLOSE COMBAT    13   HAGGLING        59
SWORD           11   TREAT POISON    34
AXE             5    TREAT DISEASE   54
SPEAR           3    TURN UNDEAD     10
MACE            12   ALCHEMY         19
FLAIL           12   LUCK            10
BOW             11   READ ANCIENT    52
CROSSBOW        7    EVALUATE MAGIC  63
SHIELD          8    CAST SPELL      49
AWARENESS       30   KARMA           0
SCAN            65   MAXIMUM POWER   0
SWIMMING        7    EXPERIENCE      20
STEALTH         7
HUNT            13
TRACK           37
FIRST AID       45
SEARCH          61
DISARM TRAP     9
PICKLOCK        4

PRESS ANY KEY TO CONTINUE.
```

Character creation offers a great number of options, and you also get to pick icons to represent each hero in battle



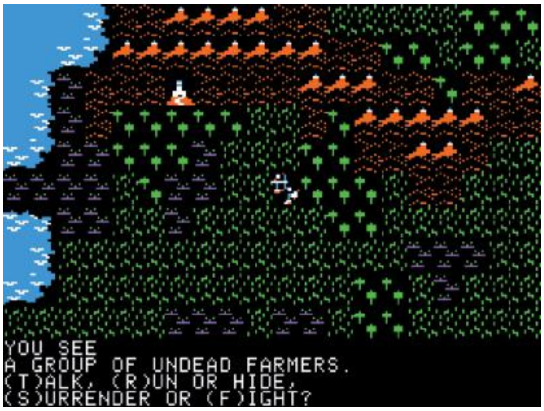
```
THE DEFENDER SUFFERS A HEAVY WOUND
TO THE ARM CAUSING LIGHT BLEEDING.
```

Characters can be injured in several ways, and can go down unconscious even if they still have all their hit points



```
CURRENT PARTY MEMBERS      10/0 DAY
ID NAME                   STATUS

A) LORD MILES OF ESLAKE   OK
B) SIR COL OF WESTMARCH   OK
C) SIR FREDERICK          POISONED
D) "BATTLEAXE" HAROLD     OK
E) LIGHTFOOT              POISONED
G) FATHER JOHN            OK
H) SOUL WIND              OK



(P)RAY FOR HEALING
(H)EAL A CHARACTER
(C)HECK A CHARACTER
(V)IEW CAPTURED ITEMS
(U)NPOISON A CHARACTER
(S)HOW PARTY HEALTH
(M)OVE MONEY AROUND
(T)ELL THE MINSTEREL OF YOUR DEEDS
E(X)IT CAMP
```

After battles you must carefully treat your characters: unconscious heroes will be left behind if you move on



```
YOU SEE
A GROUP OF UNDEAD FARMERS.
(T)ALK, (R)UN OR HIDE,
(S)URRENDER OR (F)IGHT?
```

The Eternal Dagger added new features, like being able to talk, surrender or hide from enemies, but it was still tedious

However, if fighting long tactical battles against random hordes of enemies gets tiresome, *Wizard's Crown* offers a novel "Quick Combat" option – the game does all the fighting, you just monitor your party status and order a quick retreat if needed.

The downside is that the AI won't fight as well as a decent player – it's especially inept with magic, leading to some costly victories. But the real issue is that if you skip combat, there isn't much game left.

The biggest problem with *Wizard's Crown* comes from how limited the backdrop is. There simply isn't enough territory to explore to justify the number of hours it takes to beat the game. Once you clear out the beginning portion of the city there is nothing left to explore, but the northern woods and southern ruins have enemies too tough for you to defeat.

So you will spend a large amount of time running through places you've already cleared, trying to attract wandering monsters for a few earned skill points and items to sell. *Wizard's Crown* requires ridiculous hours of grinding so you can eventually improve your characters enough to move on.

The sequel, *The Eternal Dagger* (1987), tried to fix this by introducing a larger world map, with varied terrain types and even added puzzles. Sadly, it also added a new fatigue system, more micro-managing and longer travelling times, demanding even more patience from players. More complicated than complex, it was a step back from its predecessor.

I really can't recommend *Wizard's Crown* to new audiences, especially when the Gold Box games took much of what was good here and made for a much better experience. Still, *Wizard's Crown* will always have a special place in my heart.

When I was a tween, my father purchased an Atari PC version of the game for me, though I was unable to get far in it back then. In 2015, I was watching over my dying father during many long days alongside his bed. I showed the *Wizard's Crown* end screen to him when I beat the game and asked if he remembered buying the game for me and he gave me a warm smile. He was dead a handful of days later.

So although I can't recommend it to others, I have no regrets over my time with it. Thanks again, Dad. **DT**

The Bard's Tale

Interplay, 1985
Apple II, Amiga, Atari ST, C64, MS-DOS, etc.

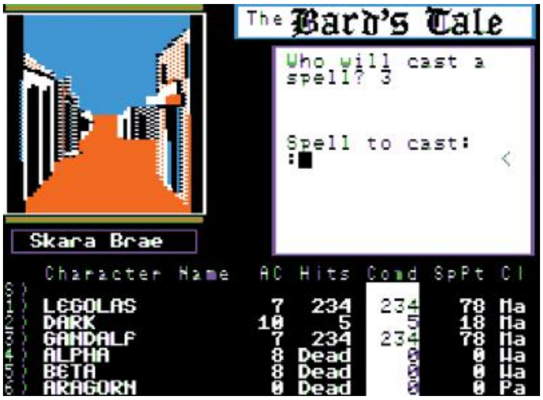
The game was first released as *Tales of the Unknown: Volume I - The Bard's Tale*. The original plan was to have later volumes based on other RPG classes, but this was abandoned and the series was renamed.

Designed in the halcyon days of computer role-playing games, when using graph paper to map out every explorable space was practically the norm, the irrepressible *Bard's Tale* trilogy is a deeply treasured series of games developed by Interplay through the mid-to-late '80s.

Strongly inspired by its older brother, *Wizardry*, *Bard's Tale* helped push the party-based dungeon crawler forward with its emphasis on tactical turn-based combat, deviously creative and eminently memorable dungeon design, atmospheric writing, monster sprite animations and its utterly unique magic system, which required the player to use four-letter code words. (ARFI, MAMA, NUKE anyone?)

Michael Cranford's ambition came in the form of a windowed first-person perspective which moves using a pseudo-3D effect as the textures change, creating an immersing sense of truly moving through a virtual world. The player's characters 1–6 are listed below, with a slot available for summoned creatures or NPCs who may occasionally join your intrepid group.

Arguably one of *Bard's Tale*'s greatest pleasures lies in its party creation: making a diverse range of characters to explore Skara Brae and meet its challenges. The rich party design gives these games a fantastic longevity and I can vividly recall experimenting with many combinations of Paladins, Warriors, Hunters, Bards, Rogues and the spell-casting classes, seeking that "perfect" party balance.



```
The Bard's Tale

Who will cast a
spell? 3

Spell to cast:
:

Skara Brae

   Character Name   AC Hits Cond SpPt Cl
S)
1) LEGOLAS           7  234  234   78 Ma
2) DARK             10    5    5   18 Ma
3) GANDALF           7  234  234   78 Ma
4) ALPHA             8 Dead    0    0 Wa
5) BETA              8 Dead    0    0 Wa
6) ARAGORN           0 Dead    0    0 Pa
```

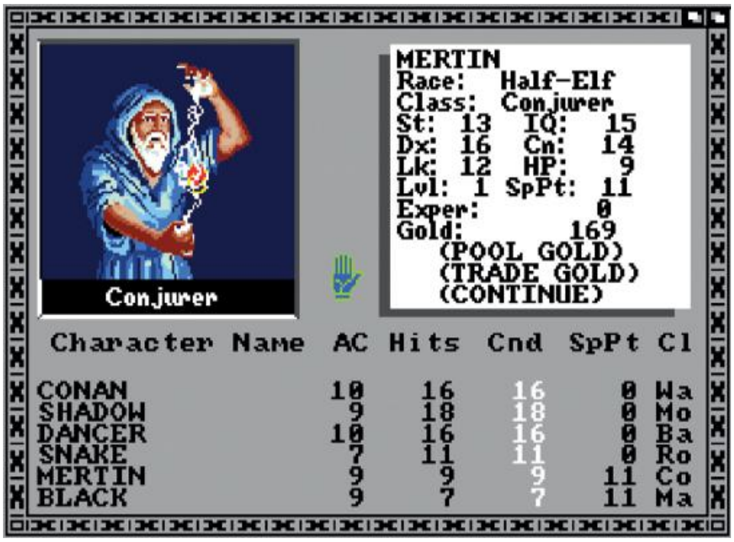
The original Apple II release may look simple today, but the smooth animations were revolutionary next to *Wizardry's* crude wire-frame corridors

A distinctive aspect of the *Bard's Tale*'s character system is the array of magic classes at the disposal of the player. In addition to the classic Bard class, who can weave a limited number of magical songs in and out of combat to influence proceedings before requiring a stiff drink, the player can also take advantage of the tiered magical class system. Whilst Magicians and Conjurers are the only two spell-casting classes initially available in character creation, after some levelling, players can choose to change the classes of their spellcasters to Sorcerer (Illusions) and Wizard (Summoning), adding depth to combat.

During the early phases of the game, *Bard's Tale* is an intensely demanding experience, as players have to familiarise themselves with Skara Brae's important locations relatively quickly, or suffer the wrath of one of the many random-encounter foes, which can easily send low-level characters to their collective doom. The incredible sense of danger one has when simply making one's way to Garth's Shoppe or exploring a new dungeon for the first time, or the sense of dread when making one's way back up the stairs with low magic reserves to the sanctuary of the Adventurer's Guild and the safety of a well-saved game, are memorable highlights of this wonderful trilogy.

Thus, a slow, careful approach to nurturing and managing one's characters in the beginning pays off as the group progressively becomes stronger and moves with greater assurance through the wintry streets and dungeons to finally face Mangar himself!

> “I had a vision of abandoning *Wizardry*’s wire-frame corridors and introducing framed animation of textured walls that moved toward you (a pseudo-3D effect). I wanted a world that looked more real than *Wizardry*’s. That was my primary design departure. I also wanted more magic involved in the game; hack and slash wasn’t as interesting to me.”
>
> – *Michael Cranford,* The Bard’s Tale *creator*



```
MERTIN
Race:  Half-Elf
Class: Conjurer
St: 13  IQ: 15
Dx: 16  Cn: 14
Lk: 12  HP:  9
Lvl: 1 SpPt: 11
Exper:       0
Gold:      169
  (POOL GOLD)
  (TRADE GOLD)
  (CONTINUE)

Conjurer

Character Name  AC  Hits  Cnd  SpPt Cl
CONAN           10   16    16    0  Wa
SHADOW           9   18    18    0  Mo
DANCER          10   16    16    0  Ba
SNAKE            7   11    11    0  Ro
MERTIN           9    9     9   11  Co
BLACK            9    7     7   11  Ma
```

Later ports of the game, such as the Amiga version released just one year after the Apple II version, vastly improved the graphics

Released a year later, *Bard’s Tale II: The Destiny Knight*, saw a much larger game world with six cities and large outdoor areas, plus more save-game chances. Players could transfer their parties from *Bards Tale I* or *Ultima III*, use the services of banks, gamble in casinos and take advantage of ranged combat.

Also new was a starter dungeon to assist players in getting up to speed with their chosen characters, alleviating the first game’s entry barrier. As portrayed in the title screen animation, the main quest in the game is to reunite the seven pieces of the destiny wand and foil the plans of the evil Archmage, Lagoth Zanta.

Ardent fans of the series will also recall the “Snares of Death” within the many challenging dungeons. These were real-time puzzles and often had a slightly esoteric element which befuddled and flummoxed gamers worldwide. I would argue that *Bard’s Tale II* is the most arduously challenging game of the trilogy – which is no small feat.

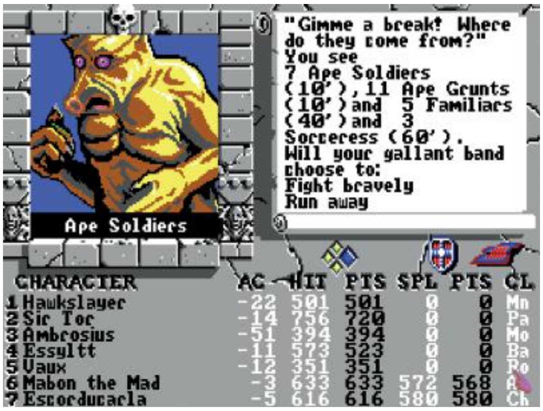
Michael Cranford left the company afterwards, but Becky "Burger" Heineman and Michael Stackpole took over and brought an even wider scope to the series with 1988’s *The Bard’s Tale III: Thief of Fate*.

Therein you must traverse multiple dimensions and solve their individual quests to collect magical items and topple the mad god Tarjan. The addition of an auto-map feature and the ability to save one’s game anywhere added a layer of accessibility and convenience to the series. Due to the variety of locations, descriptive prose within dungeons and overall story, the third game remains my favourite and closest to my heart.

Personally, I found much delight in the writing, as it’s richly atmospheric and yields many poetic moments – from the articulate to the poignantly romantic and even tragic. I fondly recall using some of the riddles from the game in *AD&D* sessions with friends!

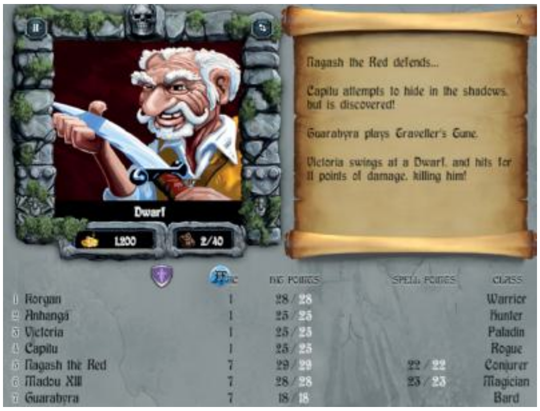
May ye all live to see why the thief was so fateful! Raise a tankard to the great *Bard’s Tale*! Huzzah! **RB**

Interplay lost the *Bard’s Tale* name to its publisher, Electronic Arts, so the fourth game in the series had to be transformed into *Dragon Wars* (1989). Many failed attempts to make *Bard’s Tale IV* followed until 2018, when Brian Fargo’s inXile released a crowd-funded sequel to the original games.



```
"Gimme a break! Where
do they come from?"
You see
7 Ape Soldiers
(10'),11 Ape Grunts
(10')and 5 Familiars
(40')and 3
Sorceress (60').
Will your gallant band
choose to:
Fight bravely
Run away

Ape Soldiers

CHARACTER         AC  HIT PTS  SPL PTS  CL
1 Hawkslayer     -22  501 501    0   0  Mn
2 Sir Toc        -14  756 720    0   0  Pa
3 Ambrosius      -51  394 394    0   0  Mo
4 Essyltt        -11  573 523    0   0  Ba
5 Vaux           -12  351 351    0   0  Ro
6 Mabon the Mad   -3  633 633  572 568  A
7 Escorducarla    -5  616 616  580 580  Ch
```

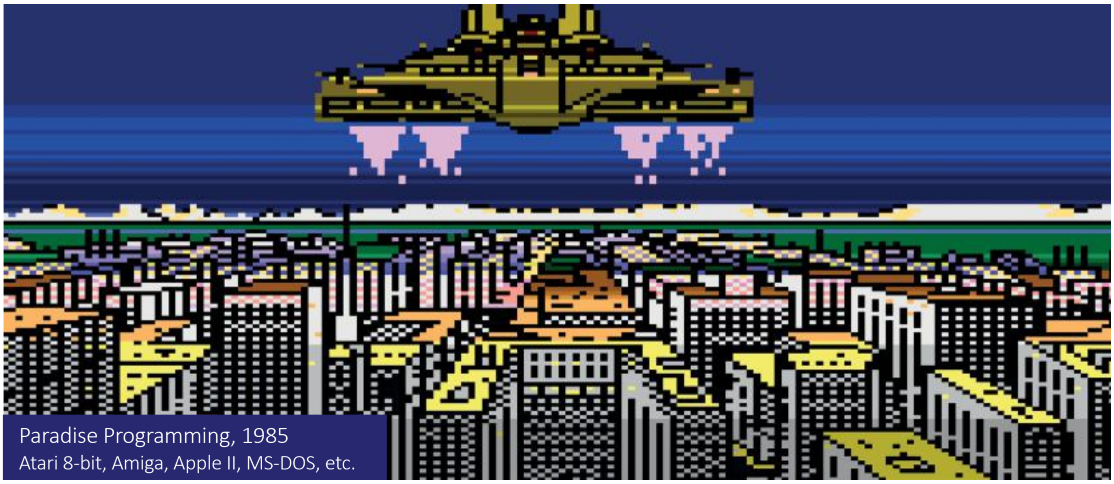
The series is often criticised for the massively frequent random encounters, and it’s quite self-aware about it



```
Nagash the Red defends...

Capilu attempts to hide in the shadows,
but is discovered!

Guarabyra plays Traveller's Tune.

Victoria swings at a Dwarf, and hits for
11 points of damage, killing him!

Dwarf
1,200   2/40

                      HIT POINTS  SPELL POINTS  CLASS
1 Rorgan          1   28 / 28                   Warrior
2 Anhanga         1   25 / 25                   Hunter
3 Victoria        1   25 / 25                   Paladin
4 Capilu          1   25 / 25                   Rogue
5 Nagash the Red  7   29 / 29     22 / 22       Conjurer
6 Madou XIII      7   28 / 28     23 / 23       Magician
7 Guarabyra       7   18 / 18                   Bard
```

The series received a faithful remaster in 2018, featuring redrawn graphics, bug fixes and a new automap system

Alternate Reality: The City



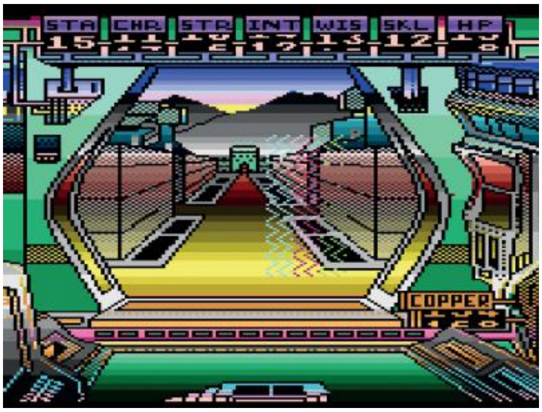
Paradise Programming, 1985
Atari 8-bit, Amiga, Apple II, MS-DOS, etc.

Created by Philip Price, *Alternate Reality* was originally planned as an ambitious series of seven scenarios – *City, Dungeon, Arena, Palace, Wilderness, Revelation* and *Destiny*. *The City* would be patched by subsequent scenarios, creating a huge, seamless adventure. Sadly, only the first two – *The City* and *The Dungeon* – were ever released.

In 1999, Philip Price and Gary Gilberson teamed up again to create an MMO called *Alternate Reality Online*, but the project was cancelled due to lack of funds.

Kidnapped by an alien spaceship, you find yourself dropped into the hostile city of Xebec's Demise, fighting against the elements and a wide variety of inhabitants, from thieves, robbers and noblemen to fantastical creatures of the night, as well as trying to understand why you were abducted.

As you step through the doorway of the spaceship the spinning numbers above your head will roll your initial statistics within the world of *Alternate Reality*. As well as the traditional Strength, Stamina, Skill, Charisma, Wisdom and Intelligence, the game features a number of additional statistics about the character, such as hunger, drunkenness and exhaustion, which remain hidden from the players. Even 30 years later, there's still discussion about the impact stats have on events and certain types of encounters.



The character creation screen, where your stats and wealth are rolled; the graphics were quite impressive for the time

You explore a large city (64 × 64 squares) through a small first-person window in the centre of the screen, using either keyboard or joystick. Unlike *Wizardry* and *Bard's Tale*, which used relatively simple 3D views which "jumped" as you moved to each map square, *Alternate Reality* provided full-colour, textured walls that scrolled smoothly by as your character moves from one map square to another.

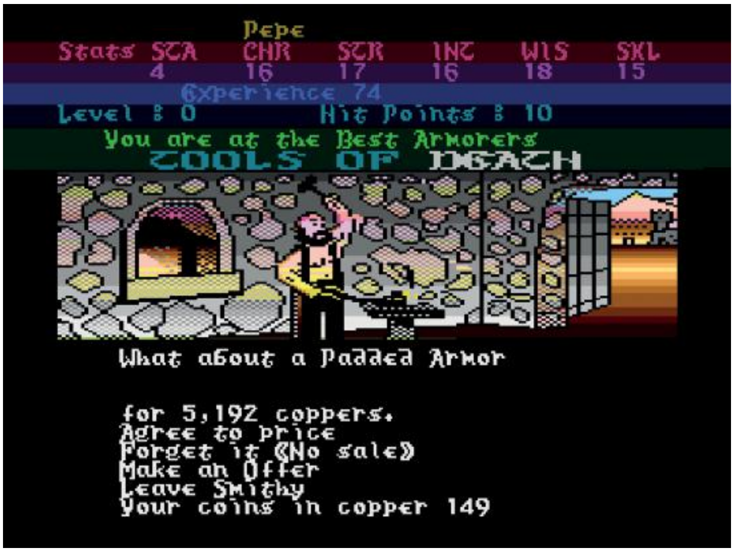
Combine that with other graphical effects, such as numerous sprite animations, a day-night cycle, rain and flashes of lightning, and you have a game that was graphically and aurally way ahead of its peers. It made use of the Atari 8-bit's unique strengths to achieve some special effects, such as maximising the number of colours on-screen, that programmers found challenging to port to other computers later on. Its elaborate opening sequence (almost 5 minutes long and with a theme song), movie-style credits and careful sync of sound and image were novel features that only became common many years later.

The music by Gary Gilbertson is memorable and well employed. There's a variety of songs for special locations and events – including a Game Over song – with lyrics appearing on screen. During encounters, the type of music can be used to determine the nature of the encounter and how hostile it is likely to be.

With the absence of any defined quests within *The City*, your goals are simply to develop a character with powerful stats, obtain high-quality equipment and amass sufficient wealth so that you may have a chance to survive in future scenarios. This is done through encountering the city's inhabitants and defeating them in combat, though wealth can also be increased through the use of variable-rate bank accounts – although a higher interest rate also means there is a higher risk of you losing your money!

"Life is very short and one must try to do what one can that best serves man. It's too short to just sit back content and watch the world go by. One is obligated to find ways to help one another. I received much less money creating games than when I worked on the B-2 Stealth bomber, but the joy I brought to so many people with the games is priceless, completely without measure. Never underestimate the power of joy."

– Philip Price,
Alternate Reality*'s creator*



```
Pepe
Stats STA  CHR  STR  INT  WIS  SKL
      4    16   17   16   18   15
     Experience 74
Level : 0        Hit Points : 10
   You are at the Best Armorers
      TOOLS OF DEATH

   What about a Padded Armor


   for 5,192 coppers.
   Agree to price
   Forget it (No sale)
   Make an Offer
   Leave Smithy
   Your coins in copper 149
```

Alternate Reality features intense use of music: some locations have unique songs, with lyrics that appear in sing-along style on the screen

After the release of *The City*, Philip Price left due to issues with the game's publisher. And so the sequel, *Alternate Reality: The Dungeon*, would arrive only in 1987, developed by Ken Jordan and Dan Pinal with some notes from Price, and with Gary Gilbertson again providing a rich variety of music.

The Dungeon is a solid dungeon crawler that can be played without *The City* and it feels like a full game. It offers several quests found either through exploring or by visiting the Oracle, who will assign quests if a suitable offering is made. Through completing these quests the player learns a lot more about the nature of *Alternate Reality*'s environment and his kidnappers.

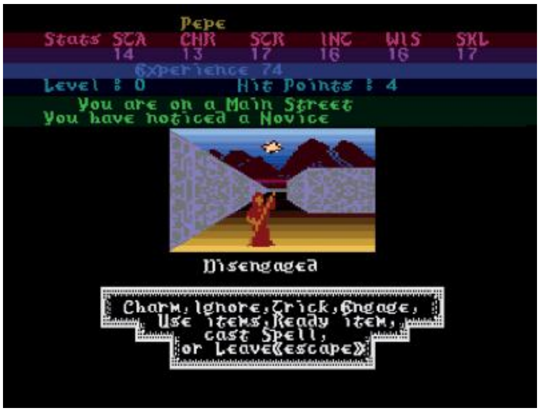
New features included a greatly expanded range of items such as scrolls, tarot cards, magical eyes, and wands, as well as more unique locations across four dungeon levels, spell-casting and an interesting guild system whereby membership in one guild makes you the instant enemy of a rival guild.

Sadly, the series was never completed. A design document for *The Arena* was completed but coding never began. By that time, 16-bit computers such as the Amiga, Atari ST and IBM PC were the rule, and the market had moved away from all the 8-bit machines. *The City* would be ported to these new computers, now featuring vastly improved graphics, but the developers did not include the patch system Price had created, so the ports were unable to link with other scenarios.

In the end, that didn't matter, as *The Dungeon* never got a 16-bit port. Versions for the Amiga and IBM PC were about 70% complete when the game's publisher, Datasoft, went out of business.

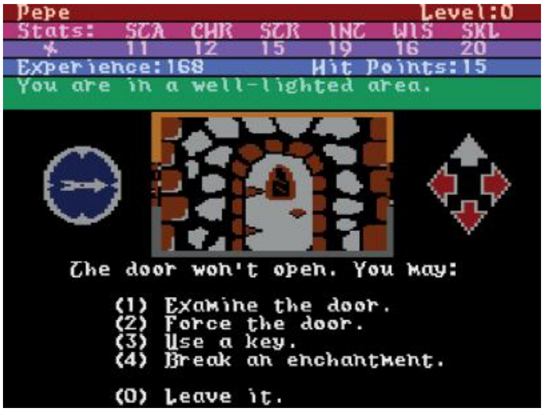
Today players still brave the streets of Xebec's Demise and the corridors of *The Dungeon*, trying to discover yet more secrets of the mysterious *Alternate Reality* and hoping that one day they will be able to finally bring their characters back to Earth. **GS**

Alternate Reality X* is a modern fan-remake of the first two games that allows you to freely move between *The City* and *The Dungeon*. It's currently in development, but you can try it at *www.crpgdev.com.



```
          Pepe
Stats STA  CHR  STR  INT  WIS  SKL
      14   13   17   16   16   17
        Experience 74
Level : 0        Hit Points : 4
   You are on a Main Street
You have noticed a Novice

          Disengaged

  Charm, Ignore, Trick, Engage,
     Use items, Ready item,
         cast Spell,
       or Leave(escape)
```

Besides fighting, players can also try to Charm or Trick foes if their Charisma and Intelligence are high enough



```
Pepe                        Level:0
Stats:  STA  CHR  STR  INT  WIS  SKL
 *      11   12   15   19   16   20
Experience:168        Hit Points:15
You are in a well-lighted area.

  The door won't open. You may:

     (1) Examine the door.
     (2) Force the door.
     (3) Use a key.
     (4) Break an enchantment.

     (0) Leave it.
```

The Dungeon added a four-level maze to explore, with various new interactions, events, enemies and quests

Phantasie

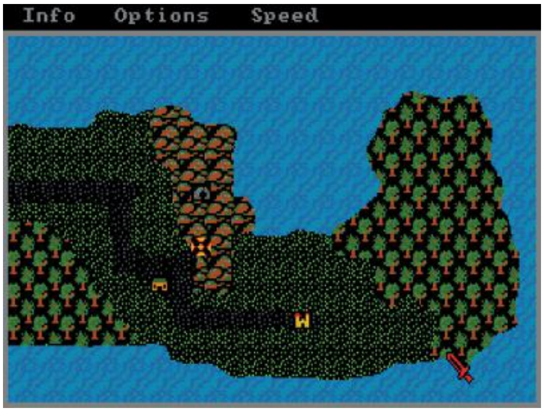
Strategic Simulations, Inc., 1985
Atari ST, Amiga, C64, Apple II and MS-DOS

Ask CRPG fans who Lord British is and chances are they'll know – he's Richard Garriott's alter ego in the *Ultima* series. Ask them who Lord Wood is, and the answer is less certain.

In the mid-'80s, SSI released a three-game series – *Phantasie* (1985), *Phantasie II* (1986) and *Phantasie III: The Wrath of Nikademus* (1987) – all created by Winston Douglas Wood. In the games, he's known as Lord Wood, the noble leader of the forces of good and the adversary of the evil Nikademus.

Phantasie's original box touts the game as a "role-playing odyssey", and this is a truly fitting description. For just as Odysseus wandered throughout ancient Greece on his journeys, the *Phantasie* series draws much of its inspiration from Greek mythology. The sorcerer, Nikademus, is bent on conquering the world with the help of his patron, the dark god Pluto. Zeus cannot allow this to go unanswered and, as in the myths of old, he finds mortals – a party of adventurers – to help his cause. The god also enlists the aid of Lord Wood and a wizard, Filmon the Sage, to guide and assist players throughout all three games.

In a 2013 interview, Winston Wood revealed he was working on *Phantasie V* during his spare time. However, in 2014 the project was put on hold due lack of funding.



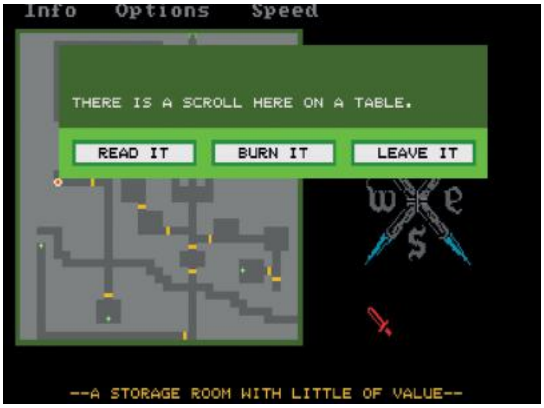
The overworld map is quite simple, containing only cities, dungeons and inns, but it's full of enemies that can even take the party by surprise at night

Throughout the games, your journeys are many and varied. Not only do you venture across medieval fantasy lands, but you also visit different planes of existence. In fact, interdimensional travel is a crucial and exhilarating aspect of the series. You will travel to the Astral Plane, the Planes of Light and Darkness, and multiple layers of the Netherworld. These aren't just dungeons to explore, but rather small overworlds, complete with towns and locations. Not only do you hear about the gods, you also meet them, Zeus at Mt. Olympus and Pluto in his "smallest castle", which is so vast it defies mortal comprehension.

One of the most unique aspects of the series is the wide range of playable races available for players' parties (15 in total). Not only can characters be humans, elves, dwarves or gnomes, but they also can be any number of *D&D*-inspired races, such as gnolls, orcs, goblins, minotaurs, Lizardmen and sprites. Each race has its own graphical representation on the combat screen, which was quite advanced for the time. It's also possible to transfer characters from game to game in the series.

The flow of the games follows a pattern that has become quite familiar in console games and JRPGs. Players' parties advance from town to town in the overworld, explore dungeons encountered along the way and gain more experience and better equipment in the process. The dungeons are displayed in a basic, mini-map-style view, but are embellished with text descriptions to bring them to life.

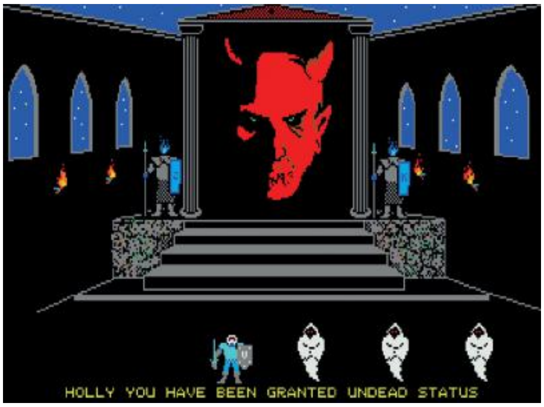
The story is mainly told through scrolls found scattered across towns and dungeons. These scrolls do an excellent job of introducing players to the people, places and events that shape the world of *Phantasie*. Players also encounter many puzzles and personalities in the dungeons, such as Filmon and Lord Wood.


Info
Options
Speed
READ IT
BURN IT
LEAVE IT

THERE IS A SCROLL HERE ON A TABLE.

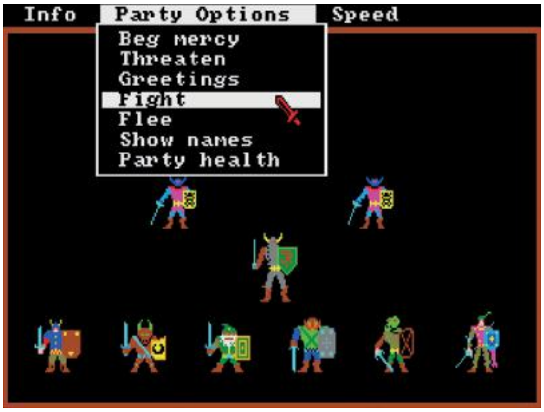
--A STORAGE ROOM WITH LITTLE OF VALUE--

The dungeons are a highlight; you'll encounter various skill checks, interactions and secrets while exploring

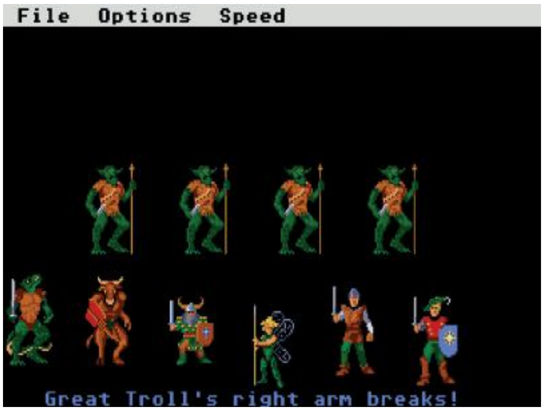


HOLLY YOU HAVE BEEN GRANTED UNDEAD STATUS

Upon defeat, your characters' souls are judged. They can be resurrected, destroyed or turned into undead


Info
Party Options
Speed
Beg mercy
Threaten
Greetings
Fight
Flee
Show names
Party health

In combat, enemies organise themselves in rows, while your party remains on the bottom of the screen


File
Options
Speed

Great Troll's right arm breaks!

Phantasie III offers improved graphics and locational damage – you can injure, break or even cut off limbs

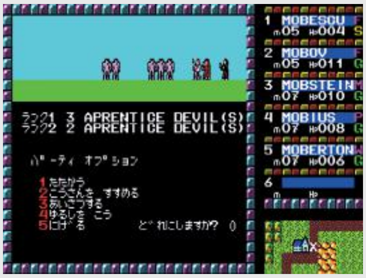
However, few encounters are so benign, and combat is an ever-present reality in the *Phantasie* series. The battle system is phase-based, with enemies organised in rows, and closely resembles that of the early *Final Fantasy* games, which arrived several years later. This system is the same in the first two games, but it's improved by the addition of ranged weapons and the ability to hit different body locations in the third game.

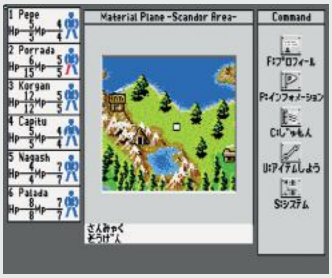
Not all battles are random, though, and there are many unique encounters to experience in the games, such as that with a creature called J.R. Trolkin in the first game, an obvious homage to J.R.R. Tolkien. More memorable though are Pluto's Minions from *Phantasie II* (1986), a collection of nine unique and challenging monsters that Pluto keeps as pets.

This all leads to a final confrontation with Nikademus in *Phantasie III* (1987). Though the series is mostly linear, players are presented with a choice before the final battle. Should they defeat Nikademus and be hailed as heroes by Zeus, or should they betray Lord Wood and side with Pluto? You decide. **BS**

Japanese Games:

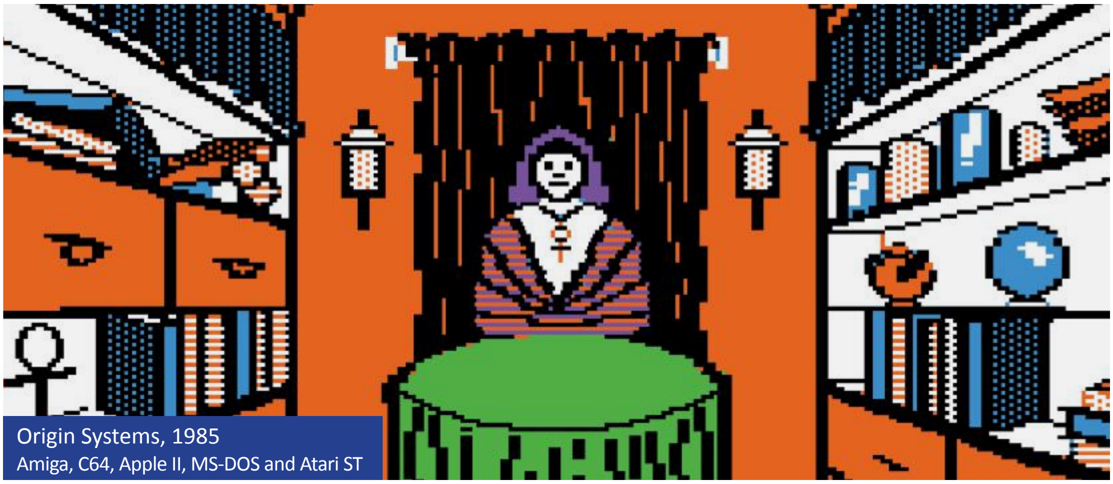
The *Phantasie* series was localised in Japan by Star Craft Inc. Several changes were made, such as altering the art style and using a side-view combat screen. The games were a success, and in 1991 Winston Wood travelled to Japan to develop *Phantasie IV: Birth of Heroes*, which remains unreleased in the West.


3 APRENTICE DEVIL(S)
2 APRENTICE DEVIL(S)
ﾊﾟｰﾃｨ ｵﾌﾟｼｮﾝ
1 たたかう
2 こうさんを すすめる
3 あいさつする
4 ゆるしを こう
5 にげる
どﾞれにしますか? 0
1 MOBESCU
2 MOBOV
3 MOBSTEIN
4 MOBIUS
5 MOBERTON
6


1 Pepe
2 Porrada
3 Korgan
4 Capitu
5 Nagash
6 Palada
Material Plane -Scandor Area-
Command
F:ﾌﾟﾛﾌｨｰﾙ
P:ｲﾝﾌｫﾒｰｼｮﾝ
C:じゅもん
U:アイテムしよう
S:システム

The side-view battle interfaces of the Japanese *Phantasie* MSX port (left), and the Japan-only *Phantasie IV* (right)

Ultima IV:
Quest of the Avatar



Origin Systems, 1985
Amiga, C64, Apple II, MS-DOS and Atari ST

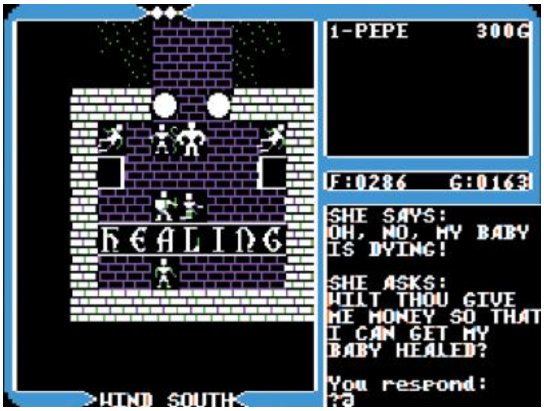
It's a very old game now, designed originally for 8-bit systems with 64K RAM and CPUs running about 1 MHz. Regardless, the achievements of *Ultima IV* are astonishing.

It begins with a novel method of character creation: the Gypsy woman and her quasi-Tarot cards. She presents several situations, each with a choice of two responses. There are no right or wrong answers.

The reading is designed to gauge your mental outlook, your morals and ethics, and give you the profession closest to them. Each profession represents one of the eight virtues: Valour (Fighter), Honour (Paladin), Spirituality (Ranger), Humility (Shepherd), Honesty (Mage), Self-Sacrifice (Tinker), Compassion (Bard) and Justice (Druid).

With many games, that's as far as it would go. You'd have your mage or fighter or bard or whatever, and play on from there – killing monsters, collecting loot and saving the world. In *Ultima IV,* this is only the start of a long journey of the soul, a journey that depends on building character; on perfecting yourself in all eight virtues and becoming the Avatar.

An upgrade for the DOS version was made by fans. The *Ultima IV Upgrade Patch* fixes bugs and improves the graphics, the UI and the music.



1-PEPE 300G

F:0286 G:0163

SHE SAYS:
OH, NO, MY BABY
IS DYING!

SHE ASKS:
WILT THOU GIVE
ME MONEY SO THAT
I CAN GET MY
BABY HEALED?

You respond:
?a

Giving money to the poor is an easy way to prove you understand Compassion, but other virtues like Honour and Humility are harder to prove

No game, before or since, has had such an objective. All others have been concerned with making you a better warrior or spell-slinger, concentrating entirely on developing physical or magical prowess. Combat is the means to this, and it is easy to see why other CRPGs have so much. It's the main way to get ahead; in some cases, the only way.

You certainly have fighting in *Ultima IV*. It's how you prove your Valour – but Valour is only one virtue. Developing those other seven depends upon how you react to and treat other people.

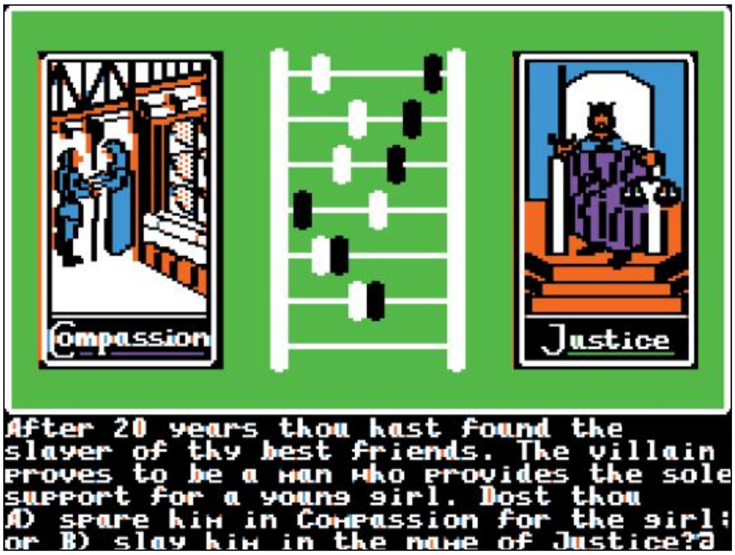
There's no backsliding here either. Each "eighth" (enlightenment in a virtue) is hard to earn and not permanent. The game watches every move you make. Start acting the wrong way, and you'll be losing those eighths. Only a true Avatar can finish this game.

There's also *Ultima IV*'s open design. You can go almost anywhere you want, any time you want; the game is very much not linear. There are many things to do, and quite a few objects to gather, but, for the most part, these can be done in any order. Eventually, of course, everything narrows down to the end game. Until that time, the player has a lot of discretion as to where to go and what to do.

While combat isn't the main focus of the game, there is plenty of it, and it's turn-based. Opponents are carefully controlled, so you won't, especially at the start, be overwhelmed. You can explore without worrying that a horde of orcs will show up and wipe you out. Also, enemies will sometimes run away if they take too many casualties.

You aren't alone, either. Over time, you gather in seven members to your party. They represent the other seven virtues, and you will need every one of those people. Further, levelling is not a big item; eight is the maximum level you can reach.

> "The point is not whether you have strong enough muscles or big enough guns to win, the issue should be: what have you learned? What wisdom have you gained from the beginning through to the end that really means you're now the appropriate person to solve the problem?"
>
> – *Richard Garriott,* Ultima IV*'s project leader*



```
After 20 years thou hast found the
slayer of thy best friends. The villain
proves to be a man who provides the sole
support for a young girl. Dost thou
A) spare him in Compassion for the girl;
or B) slay him in the name of Justice?
```

Creating your character with the Gypsy's Tarot cards; your choice is always the right one ... for you

Conversation has always been a staple of the *Ultimas,* even if it was very limited in previous games. An important aspect here is that people give you information because they like you, trust you, or respect you. This is trust or respect you earn by your actions during play. The closer you are to the ideal of Avatar-hood, the more likely people are to tell you important things.

There is none of the "quid pro quo" that infects so many games. You know: "So, you want the location of the +30 Sword of Instant Death? First, you must travel to the lair of the Dread Funny Bunnies, and bring back to me the Drum of Ages (batteries not included)." Nowhere in *Ultima IV* are you ever someone's "gofer".

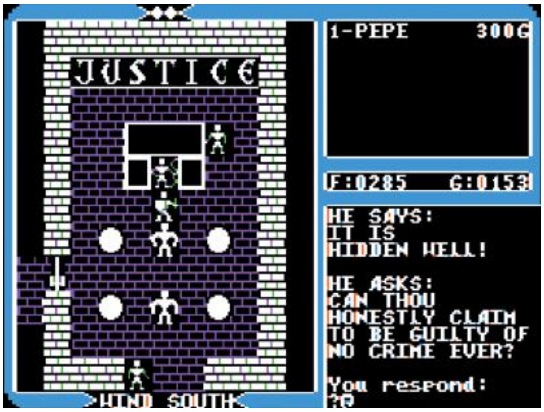
People don't send you off to retrieve lost/stolen items as though you're some sort of pet dog. Nor do they ask you to do any "favours". Everything you learn, every item you obtain, is for your own use.

Perhaps the most iconoclastic part of *Ultima IV* is the ending. As a friend of mine put it, "It's the only game where the goal is to read a book." Not trashing Foozle, not saving the world (again), but penetrating to the depths of a dungeon to read the Codex of Ultimate Wisdom. There have been other games with nonviolent endings, but none so original as this.

For all that, some of today's gamers may find the game unplayable. The graphics are primitive. There is no log, no journal, no automap, no big loot drops, no hand-holding. Patience and extensive note-taking are crucial, because there is so much to learn. You'd better learn it all too; you're tested throughout the final dungeon to ensure you really know what it means to be the Avatar.

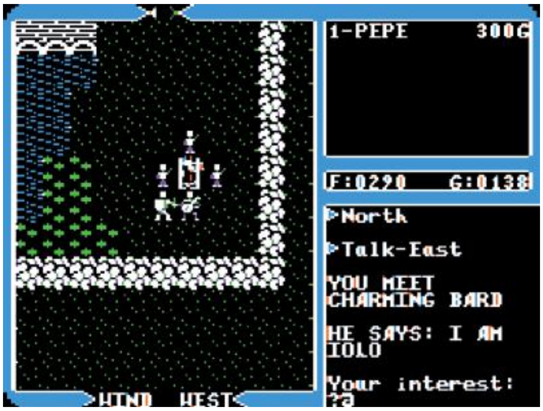
However, if you're looking for a unique experience that doesn't rely on hack-and-slash or endless "side jobs", then *Ultima IV* is still one-of-a-kind, even after all these years. **SC**

Created by fan Chris Hopkins, *Ultima IV Part 2: Dude, where's my Avatar?* is a parody of the *Ultima* series. It takes place in the gap of time between *Ultima IV* and *Ultima V*.



```
1-PEPE     300G
F:0285  G:0153
HE SAYS:
IT IS
HIDDEN WELL!
HE ASKS:
CAN THOU
HONESTLY CLAIM
TO BE GUILTY OF
NO CRIME EVER?
You respond:
?
```

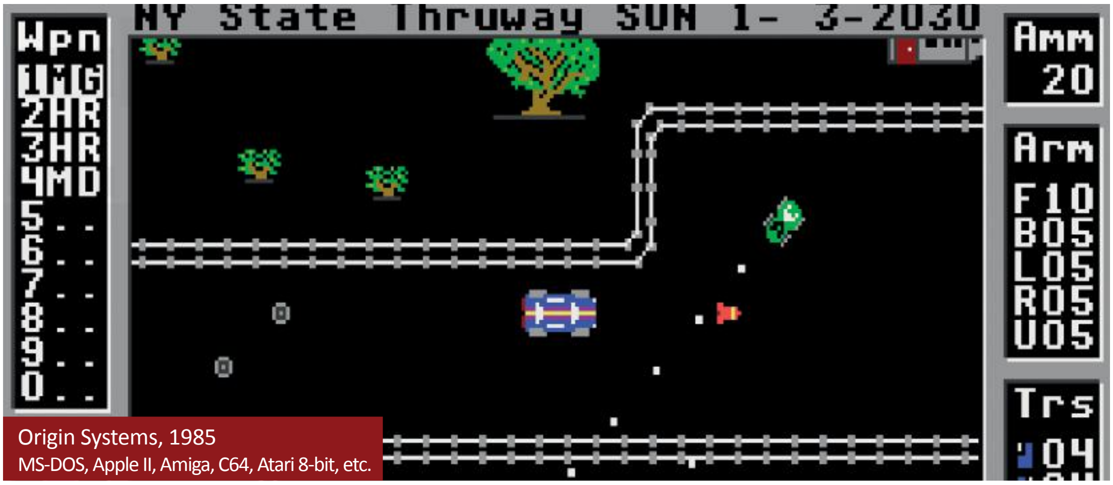
There are no quests in the sense of doing a task to get a reward – what you must do is become (and remain) worthy



```
1-PEPE     300G
F:0290  G:0138
>North
>Talk-East
YOU MEET
CHARMING BARD
HE SAYS: I AM
IOLO
Your interest:
?
```

Ultima IV introduced seven recruitable companions, who became important recurring characters in the series

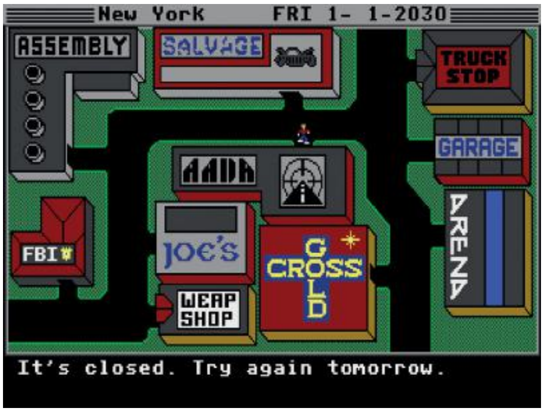
Autoduel



Origin Systems, 1985
MS-DOS, Apple II, Amiga, C64, Atari 8-bit, etc.

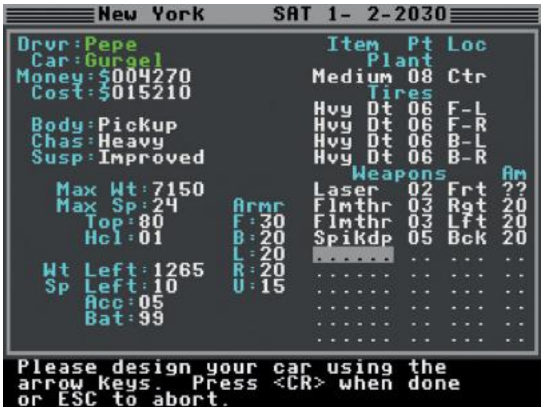
Dystopian futures often feel like interesting RPG settings, but late '70s cinema delivered two cult classics that just begged to be played: *Death Race 2000* and *Mad Max*. Steve Jackson artfully translated that hype into 1980's *Car Wars*, a popular tabletop RPG all about building your own vehicle of destruction and driving it across a post-apocalyptic US. *Autoduel*, born of a deal between Steve Jackson and Origin Systems, is its CRPG adaptation.

***Autoduel* was created by Chuck Bueche and Richard Garriott, in one of the latter's rare ventures outside of the *Ultima* series.**



```
It's closed. Try again tomorrow.
```

There are 16 cities you can travel to, either by taking a bus or by manually driving there (and surviving the trip); you can even visit Origin's HQ in Manchester



```
New York      SAT 1- 2-2030
Drvr:Pepe                  Item   Pt Loc
 Car:Gurgel                     Plant
Money:$004270             Medium 08 Ctr
 Cost:$015210                   Tires
                          Hvy Dt 06 F-L
 Body:PicKup              Hvy Dt 06 F-R
 Chas:Heavy               Hvy Dt 06 B-L
 Susp:Improved            Hvy Dt 06 B-R
                              Weapons   Am
   Max Wt:7150            Laser  02 Frt ??
   Max Sp:24        Armr  Flmthr 03 Rgt 20
      Top:80        F:30  Flmthr 03 Lft 20
      Hcl:01        B:20  SpiKdp 05 BcK 20
                    L:20  ...... .. ... ..
  Wt Left:1265      R:20  ...... .. ... ..
  Sp Left:10        U:15  ...... .. ... ..
      Acc:05              ...... .. ... ..
      Bat:99              ...... .. ... ..
                          ...... .. ... ..
Please design your car using the
arrow Keys.  Press <CR> when done
or ESC to abort.
```

Building your own car is *Autoduel*'s high point: there are many options and factors to consider, from weight, speed and cargo room to weapon and armour placement

Although a licensed product, *Autoduel* features a massive difference: while *Car Wars* was turn-based, Origin's team took some lessons from Midway's 1983 arcade hit *Spy Hunter* and made the game an arcadey, top-down, real-time driving game that requires fast reflexes and is best played with a joystick.

True to its source material, *Autoduel* features an incredibly detailed car-building system. You'll choose from various car types (compact, van, pickup, luxury, etc.) and equip it with your choice of chassis, armour, suspension, tyres, weapons and power plant.

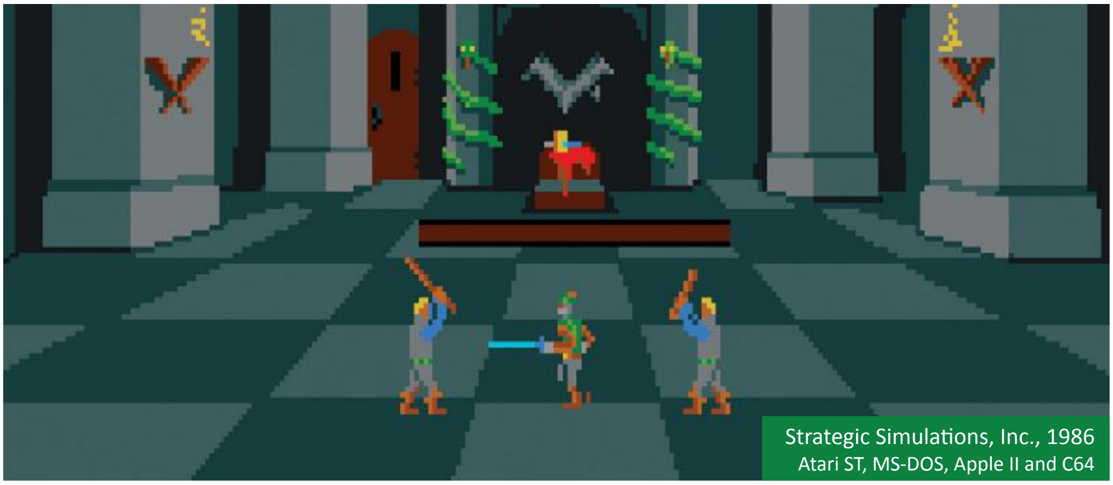
This is where the game shines. It's a joy to build your own vehicles, creating a fast car that can outrun enemies and lay mines or buying a large power plant to use laser weapons. There's also a robust locational damage system, as weapons, tyres, armour layers and even the driver have their own hit points. Get shot on a side that has no armour left and you're likely dead.

You can freely drive across the Northeastern US, hunting outlaws (and salvaging their cars), battling in arenas and taking delivery quests. It can get a bit repetitive after a while, but build enough prestige and you'll unlock a final mission for the FBI.

Unfortunately, *Autoduel*'s top-down driving and combat has aged badly. Yes, it was great for 1985, but lacks the visceral feedback of modern 3D driving games. However, its real flaw is the extreme difficulty. The combat is fairly challenging but gets frustrating when paired with permadeath – if you die the game erases your save, forcing you to restart from scratch unless you have a very expensive clone of yourself.

If you enjoy such a high challenge (or don't mind making manual backups of your save files), then be sure to take *Autoduel* for a ride. While there are many other vehicular combat games out there, very few can match the complexity of this classic. **FE**

Rings of Zilfin



Strategic Simulations, Inc., 1986
Atari ST, MS-DOS, Apple II and C64

Rings of Zilfin is one of those early CRPGs that really makes you wonder how differently the genre could have evolved. The game is a unique mix of light RPG mechanics, *King's Quest*-styled adventure and fast-paced arcade-like battles.

The plot is the usual save-the-world fare, but it's played with some twists. The world of Batiniq is threatened by the evil Lord Dragos, who has one of the two legendary Rings of Zilfin. Your rather ambitious goal is to somehow get both rings for yourself and use them to destroy Dragos once and for all.

The world is divided into a series of locations, such as villages, forests, mountains, dungeons and deserts. You must journey through the land, collecting items, purchasing equipment, talking to NPCs in search of hints and battling the occasional enemy.

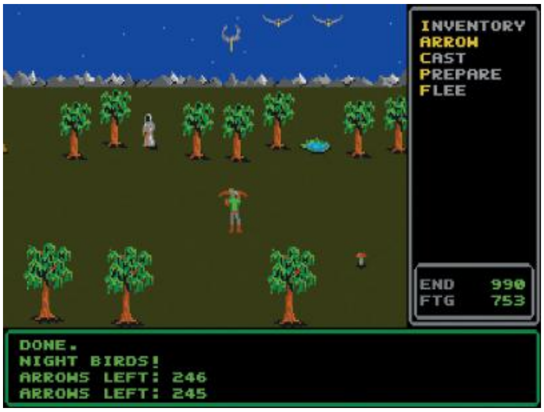
Most of these foes are fought on the ground, in real time; you can slash them with your sword, cast spells or use the bow at point-blank range. However, some foes are flying creatures that must be shot down with the bow or with projectile spells, *Space Invaders*-style.

Your endurance will go down with each hit you take, but you'll also have to manage fatigue, so you can effectively perform actions such as attacking, casting spells or just travelling. Luckily, there are plenty of magical mushrooms and healers in Batiniq.

While *Zilfin* has an interesting world, this does have a critical flaw. Instead of directly travelling from one area to another, you must always go through a long and repetitive side-scrolling journey, battling monsters, collecting food and resting. These journeys all look and play exactly the same, which gets boring really fast, especially when you must cross a large number of areas. You'll eventually gain access to a teleport spell that speeds things up, but few players will endure playing enough to reach that point.

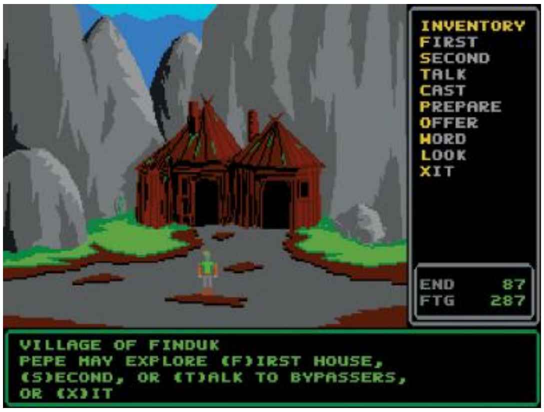
It's disappointing really, for the rest of the game is surprisingly smooth and well-crafted, even though it's an easy game, clearly designed for beginners. It wouldn't be far-fetched to consider *Rings of Zilfin* a lost precursor to the famous *Quest for Glory* series.

The creator of *Zilfin*, Ali Atabek, would move on to develop *The Magic Candle* series in 1989, in which a few of these concepts would get a second and much more enjoyable chance to shine. **FE**



```
END    990
FTG    753

DONE.
NIGHT BIRDS!
ARROWS LEFT: 246
ARROWS LEFT: 245
```

Night Birds might appear during your travels – you must quickly shoot them down, *Space Invaders* fashion, or they will call more monsters

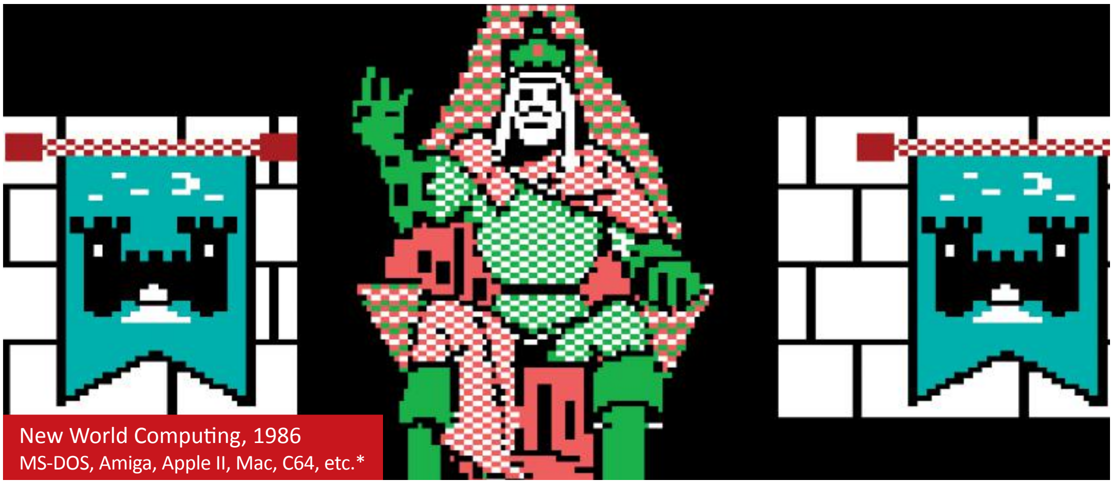


```
END     87
FTG    287

VILLAGE OF FINDUK
PEPE MAY EXPLORE (F)IRST HOUSE,
(S)ECOND, OR (T)ALK TO BYPASSERS,
OR (X)IT
```

Towns and villages provide healers and places such as shops and taverns; talking to the NPCs will provide important clues for success in your quest

Might and Magic:

Book I - Secret of the Inner Sanctum



New World Computing, 1986
MS-DOS, Amiga, Apple II, Mac, C64, etc.*

Might and Magic - Book I is the first of a long series of party-based "blobber" RPGs initiated by John Van Caneghem, founder of New World Computing. It offered a new take on the sub-genre then dominated by *Wizardry,* with a large outdoor open world and a "real" turn-based combat system, as opposed to the popular phased one.

In games like *Wizardry* and *The Bard's Tale* all commands were issued in bulk at the beginning of the turn, then played out. *Might and Magic* executed every command immediately, for both the player and the enemies, allowing players the opportunity to instantly react to how events unfold.

Preference for one or the other is a matter of taste, but this new way to handle a party in combat offered an interesting alternative.

The open world brought a sense of liberty few games had dared offer until then. The map lures the player in with the promise of discovery and developments, and the game does keep that promise. The environments include forests, deserts, swamps, mountains, oceans and ethereal realms.

The world is a large patchwork of puzzles. Forest mazes are not designed to appear natural, but rather offer challenges to access secret areas that reap higher rewards, including keys to unlock areas you may have run into previously but were unable to enter.

The game's artful use of impenetrable forest, mountain walls, portals and secret passages makes many areas into challenges that need to be revisited repeatedly before you can confidently draw that last square and complete your own map.

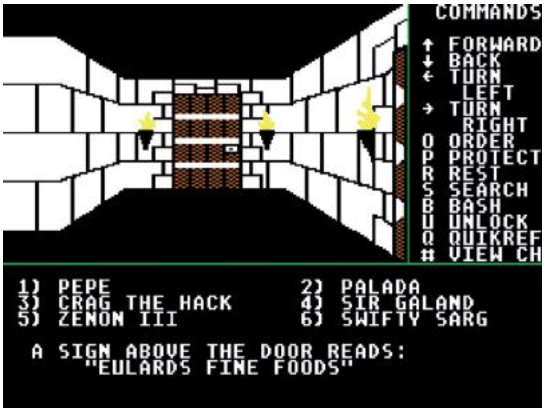
Many will be shaken off by the necessity to draw maps and keep notes. But these challenges to the player's rigour will make stepping out of the comfort zone worth it. Every challenge brings its load of satisfaction when overcome, and carefully building your own maps is no exception.

The combat system, backed by dozens of tactical spells, is an exercise in nail-biting suspense, in which one poor decision can often turn the tide against you and spell defeat. A good decision can lead to a satisfying victory against apparently disastrous odds. Granted, not every battle offers these situations, but they come around enough to make the game memorable.

While there is, to some extent, a bit of level scaling (as encounters adapt to the strength of your party), it only goes so far. Roaming the world therefore leads to encounters that inevitably lead to an untimely death. Even within the same map, accessing a remote area might lead to scripted encounters that offer an unexpected level of resistance, keeping you on your toes.

Another aspect that keeps you alert is the fact that the only way to save your progress is to return to the inn. This saves in a single slot, overwriting the previous entry, and can lead to intense frustration, but it also makes each battle more suspenseful.

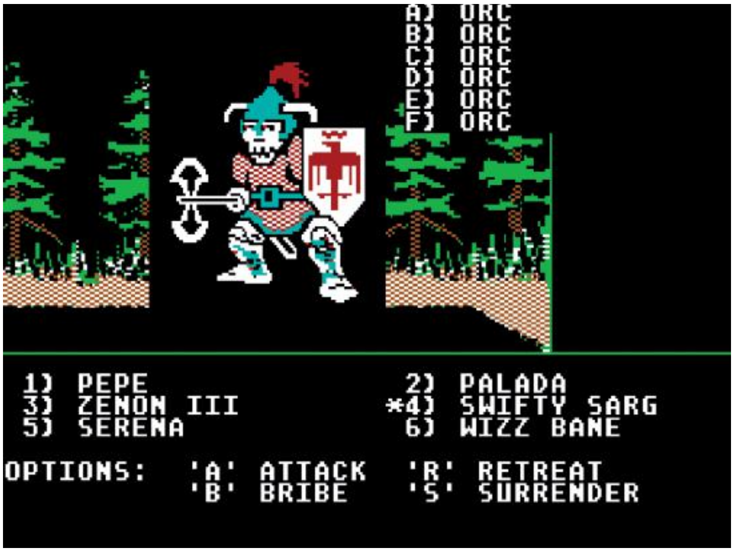
****Might and Magic* was a huge hit, earning several awards and being ported to multiple systems, including later remakes for the NES and Japanese computers.**



```
 1) PEPE               2) PALADA
 3) CRAG THE HACK      4) SIR GALAND
 5) ZENON III          6) SWIFTY SARG

  A SIGN ABOVE THE DOOR READS:
      "EULARDS FINE FOODS"
```

Might and Magic's open-world structure was novel at the time, and a refreshing change from linear dungeon crawls

> "The biggest challenge for me was being the designer/creator of the games and the CEO of the company. This dual role always created personal conflict. On one hand I wanted to make every game perfect, more features, better polish … and on the other I had to pay the bills. My ongoing compromise was: if I stayed profitable, I will always be able to make another game."
>
> *– Jon Van Caneghem,* Might and Magic*'s creator*



```
                                    A) ORC
                                    B) ORC
                                    C) ORC
                                    D) ORC
                                    E) ORC
                                    F) ORC

 1) PEPE                     2) PALADA
 3) ZENON III               *4) SWIFTY SARG
 5) SERENA                   6) WIZZ BANE

OPTIONS:    'A' ATTACK     'R' RETREAT
            'B' BRIBE      'S' SURRENDER
```

The high difficulty and the long hours of play you can lose by dying make retreating or surrendering very useful options

Then there is the world and story. Little regard is given to realism. You will run into an odd mix of magic and alien technology, and be attacked by unlikely parties of insect swarms, vampire bats and clerics, which can just as easily form an alliance against you as more typical formations of Orcs and hippogriffs. This gives an out-of-this-world sense that adds to the experience without wrecking it, as a less abstract title probably would.

Might and Magic I is light on text, but it manages to form the foundation of a rich lore and a storyline that will be expanded upon with future titles. NPCs will offer quests that contribute to this, and mention is made of legendary characters in short bursts of text found in key locations throughout the world.

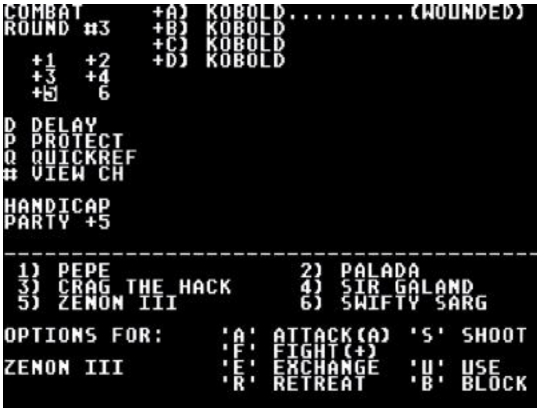
All your hard-won victories and the intricate pieces of this large world move together towards a finale that opens the way to one of the longest series of role-playing adventures (ten titles!).

The second of these, *Might and Magic II: Gates to Another World* (1988), largely offers more of the same. The combat system, for one, is quite similar, albeit with a new list of spells and new skills to acquire at higher levels, and running away is riskier.

The levelling system evolves as well, offering many more levels but with less noticeable effects. There are two new classes (Ninja and Barbarian), non-combat skills that can be acquired while adventuring (path-finding, mountaineering, etc.), a rudimentary automapping feature (enabling of which requires the acquisition of a skill) and much-improved visuals.

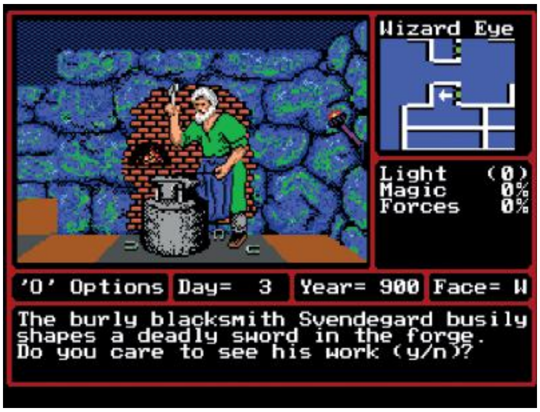
While the early *Might and Magic* games have challenging (and sometimes frustrating) gameplay, the satisfaction of overcoming them is still something special that's rarely rivalled. As an indie developer, they inspired me to undertake my own series, *Swords and Sorcery*, following in John Van Caneghem's footsteps decades after these were published. **CC**

SPOILER: *Might and Magic II* has an unusual and controversial ending: after the final battle you have to solve a cryptogram in under 15 minutes or you die.



```
COMBAT        +A) KOBOLD.........(WOUNDED)
ROUND #3      +B) KOBOLD
              +C) KOBOLD
  +1   +2     +D) KOBOLD
  +3   +4
  +5    6

D DELAY
P PROTECT
Q QUICKREF
# VIEW CH

HANDICAP
PARTY +5
------------------------------------------
 1) PEPE                2) PALADA
 3) CRAG THE HACK       4) SIR GALAND
 5) ZENON III           6) SWIFTY SARG

OPTIONS FOR:      'A' ATTACK(A)  'S' SHOOT
                  'F' FIGHT(+)
ZENON III         'E' EXCHANGE   'U' USE
                  'R' RETREAT    'B' BLOCK
```

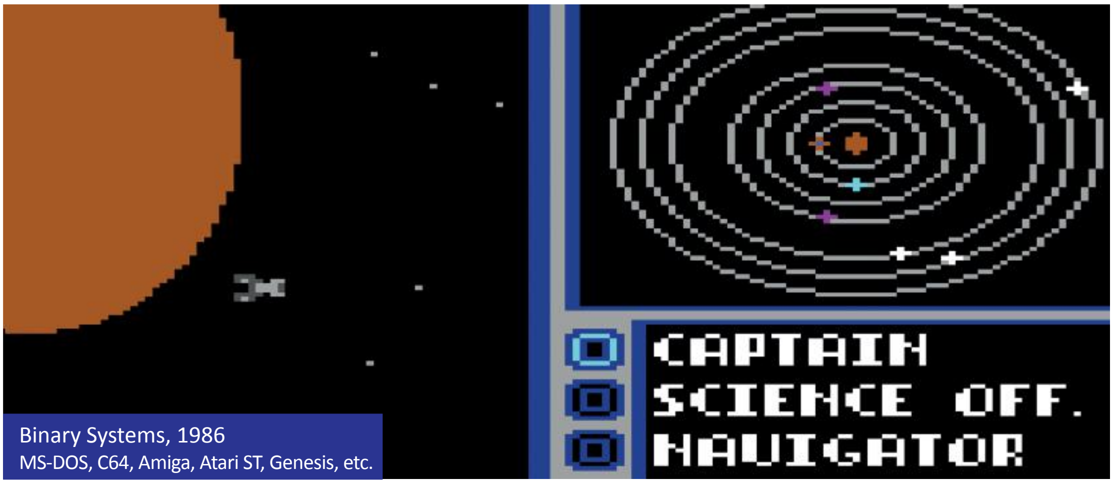
Combat is text-only, but offers great tactical depth; actions are performed one at a time, giving you time to react



```
                          Wizard Eye

                          Light    (0)
                          Magic     0%
                          Forces    0%

'O' Options Day=  3 Year= 900 Face= W
The burly blacksmith Svendegard busily
shapes a deadly sword in the forge.
Do you care to see his work (y/n)?
```

Might and Magic II introduced improved graphics, new character skills and an automap, but still plays similarly

Starflight



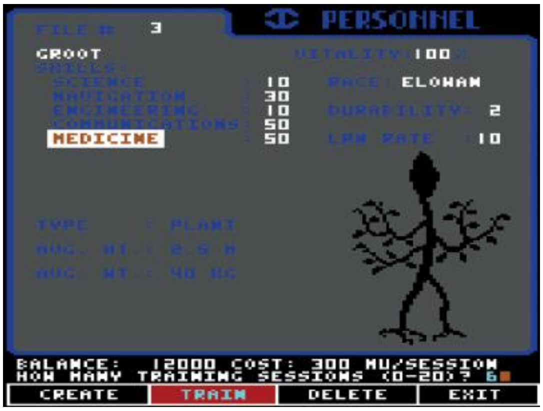
Binary Systems, 1986
MS-DOS, C64, Amiga, Atari ST, Genesis, etc.

At a time when games were made by two or three people over 6–12 months, it took a five-man team over three years to develop *Starflight*.

Starflight perfectly captures what made *Star Trek* so endearing: exploring, negotiating with alien races and life-and-death space battles. All set in an open-world, procedurally-generated galaxy you could explore for hundreds of hours. Not bad for a game crammed into 64KB of memory.

Planet Arth is in trouble. Deadly solar flares are occurring all over the galaxy, threatening to wipe out civilisation. Your task is to find fuel for refugee ships leaving Arth along with colonisable planets for them, uncover ancient alien artefacts, and figure out why the solar flares are happening in the first place. All this is accomplished through scanning planets, exploring their surfaces and speaking with the star-faring aliens.

The adventure begins at Interstel's spaceport, where you walk your avatar through various departments to prepare for your journey, in one of the first "walking menus" in games. There you can recruit up to six brave crewmen from five different races, such as a quick-learning plant-based species and a highly skilled robot race. The robots are an interesting first choice, as they start with high initial skills, but can never improve through training, as the other races do.



```
FILE #    3                PERSONNEL
GROOT                   VITALITY:100%
SKILLS:
  SCIENCE          : 10   RACE: ELOWAN
  NAVIGATION       : 30
  ENGINEERING      : 10   DURABILITY: 2
  COMMUNICATIONS   : 50
  MEDICINE         : 50   LRN RATE  : 10

TYPE      : PLANT
AVG. HT.  : 2.5 M
AVG. WT.  : 40 KG
BALANCE:   12000 COST: 300 MU/SESSION
HOW MANY TRAINING SESSIONS (0-20)? 6
```

The five races you can recruit from all have very different skills, learning rates and durability; your crew composition also affects your dealings with other races

You begin with a small budget to equip your ship and train your crew. These are tough initial choices. Should you add weapons and shields or train your Science Officer to scan planets accurately? There's no hand-holding here: leave the starport without cargo pods and you have cut yourself off from much of the revenue-generating opportunities in the game.

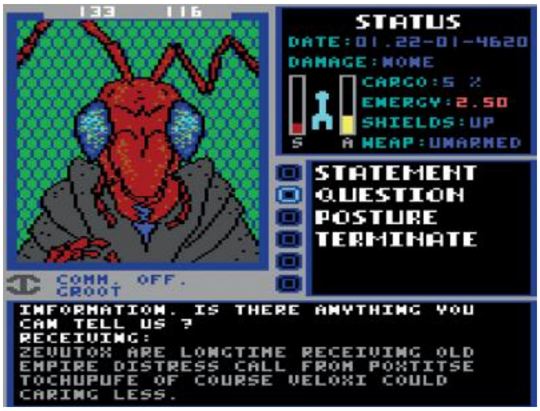
Once ready, you can open the ship's galactic map. It's awash with nebulae, wormholes, hundreds of stars and over 800 procedurally-generated planets waiting to be explored, making you feel very small and alone in this sea of opportunity. Your only limitation is fuel.

The ship is easily piloted using the cursor/numpad keys: no pesky Newtonian physics to deal with. Further actions are spread across your officers, in a simple and immersive UI; e.g. to heal a crew member, select the Doctor, open its menu and choose Treat.

Once you reach a planet, you can order your Science Officer to scan it, and based on their skill you will see important details like gravity and average temperature. Should you decide to land, simply select a landing area and confirm. The game will then render a first-person landing into the exact point you selected – quite an impressive feature at the time!

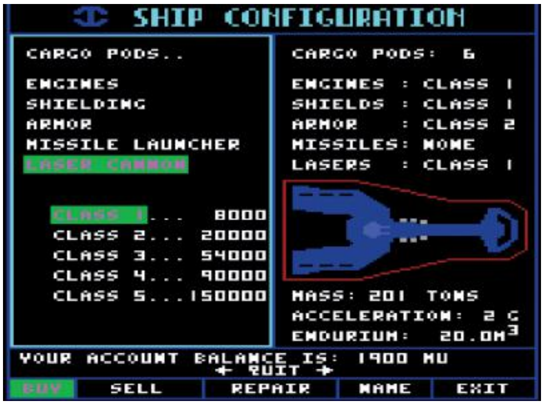
The crew will then disembark into a tank-like rover and start exploring the procedurally-generated surface, using a scanner and your intuition in search of resources. Where do you go? Anywhere you please! But don't stray too far from the ship, as your rover's fuel won't last long. This creates some of the most stressful risk/reward decisions in gaming: to travel just a wee bit further to get some valuable mineral or alien creature, or head back to the ship.

Mistakes are deadly. Permadeath means not only does your intrepid crew die horrible deaths, but the game bounces out to DOS and deletes your save file.



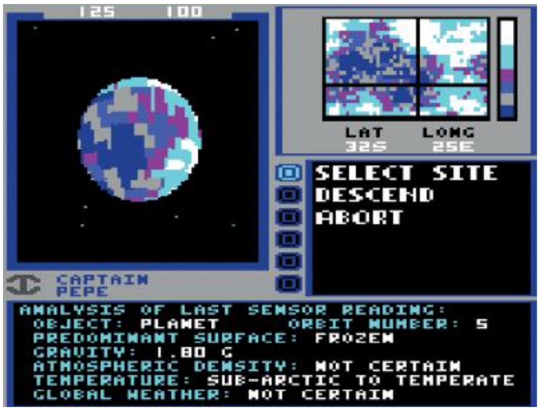
```
DATE:01.22-01-4620
DAMAGE:NONE
CARGO:5 %
ENERGY:2.50
SHIELDS:UP
WEAP:UNARMED
COMM. OFF.
GROOT
INFORMATION. IS THERE ANYTHING YOU
CAN TELL US ?
RECEIVING:
ZEUUTOX ARE LONGTIME RECEIVING OLD
EMPIRE DISTRESS CALL FROM POXTITSE
TOCHUPUFE OF COURSE VELOXI COULD
CARING LESS.
```

Having a well-trained Communication Officer is vital to avoid misunderstandings with the many alien races



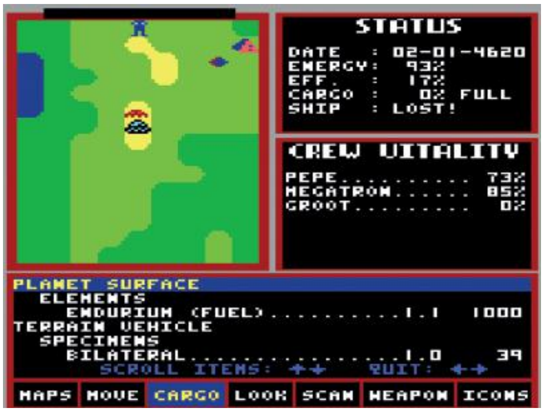
```
CARGO PODS..              CARGO PODS:   6

ENGINES                   ENGINES  : CLASS 1
SHIELDING                 SHIELDS  : CLASS 1
ARMOR                     ARMOR    : CLASS 2
MISSILE LAUNCHER          MISSILES: NONE
LASER CANNON              LASERS   : CLASS 1

   CLASS 1...    8000
   CLASS 2...   20000
   CLASS 3...   54000
   CLASS 4...   90000
   CLASS 5...150000       MASS: 201  TONS
                          ACCELERATION:  2 G
                          ENDURIUM:   20.0M³
YOUR ACCOUNT BALANCE IS:  1900 MU
               ← QUIT →
```

You start the game with limited resources, and will be forced to make hard choices when first configuring your ship



```
ANALYSIS OF LAST SENSOR READING:
 OBJECT: PLANET        ORBIT NUMBER:  5
 PREDOMINANT SURFACE: FROZEN
 GRAVITY:  1.80 G
 ATMOSPHERIC DENSITY: NOT CERTAIN
 TEMPERATURE: SUB-ARCTIC TO TEMPERATE
 GLOBAL WEATHER: NOT CERTAIN
```

Always analyse planets before landing, else you risk being crushed by gravity or destroyed by extreme temperatures



```
DATE   : 02-01-4620
ENERGY:   93%
EFF.   :   17%
CARGO  :    0% FULL
SHIP   : LOST!

PEPE..........  73%
MEGATRON......  85%
GROOT.........   0%

PLANET SURFACE
   ELEMENTS
      ENDURIUM (FUEL)...........1.1   1000
TERRAIN VEHICLE
   SPECIMENS
      BILATERAL.................1.0     39
          SCROLL ITEMS: ↑↓     QUIT: ←→
```

Your goal when exploring planets is to capture specimens, collect rare minerals and survive their many hazards

Exploring the universe will also inevitably bring you into contact with alien ships. This displays the scariest line you can get in this permadeath game: "Scanners indicate unidentified object"!

These encounters are real-time events. You can manoeuvre around the alien ships and make choices such as raising shields, arming weapons, scanning or hailing the aliens. Firing is as simple as pressing the space bar, with the game choosing the appropriate weapon based on range from the target. Your actions will obviously affect communication opportunities.

In an age dominated by text parsers, conversation is, thankfully, abstracted to a few efficient questions, postures and statements. It may seem sparse but the game does it surprisingly well, filling out your choices with richly worded text. As you learn more, questions get better and responses reveal more.

It's interesting that the designers chose a real-time conversation system. After making a choice, you wait. Are they simply not responding, are they preparing their weapons, or are they just thinking? This kind of tension hasn't been explored much elsewhere.

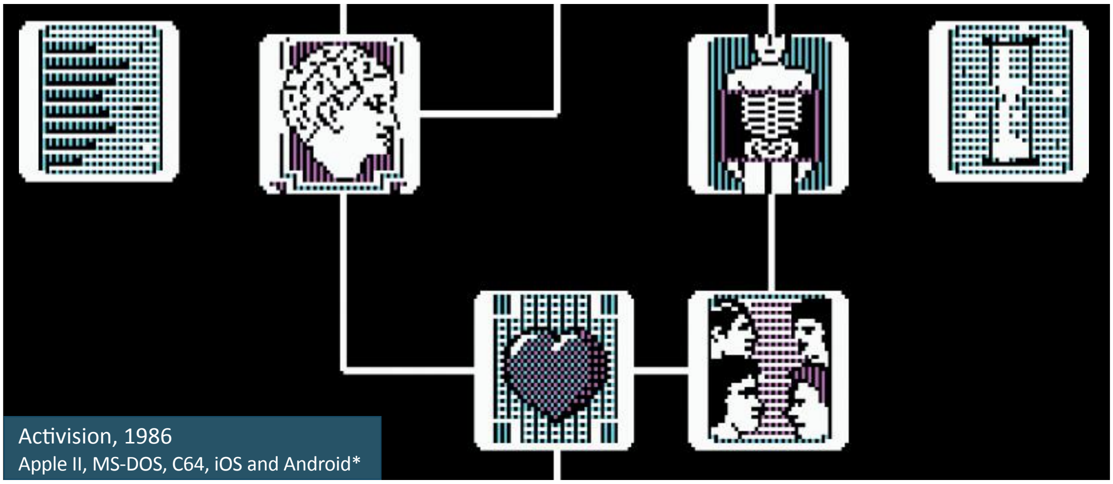
The game also pioneered a system they called "story network". Time passes in the universe while you are off exploring, with solar flares and other events occurring on a regular schedule. When you return to the star dock, new missives are available either based on time, your actions or both, propelling the story forward to the next node.

The sequel, *Starflight 2: Trade Routes of the Cloud Nebula* (1989) is simply a better *Starflight 1*. With a new story, improved graphics, reduced emphasis on mining, and higher emphasis on trading and interacting with aliens, it generally smoothed out the sharp edges. Years later, *Protostar* (1993) began development as *Starflight 3* but went its own way due to contract issues. The series would also go on to inspire *Star Control* (1990), and its lasting influence is still strongly felt in games like *Mass Effect* and even *Dwarf Fortress*.

A genre-defining game, it was perfectly summed up by famed science fiction author Orson Scott Card (of *Ender's Game*): "*Starflight* is the first science fiction computer game that actually gives you something of the experience of roaming through the galaxy". **TH**

Starflight **sold a very respectable 100,000 units on DOS, then was ported to multiple systems and sold over 1 million units. In 1991 a heavily updated Mega Drive/ Genesis version was released.**

Alter Ego

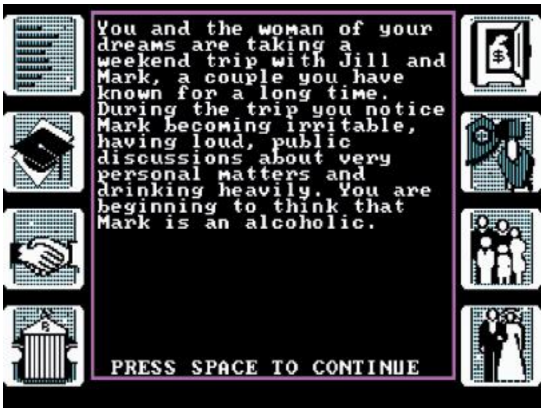


Activision, 1986
Apple II, MS-DOS, C64, iOS and Android*

***Alter Ego* was recently re-released for iOS, Android, and browsers. Its stewards are also working on expanding and updating the game for today's society.**

The phrase "computer role-playing game" brings to mind certain connotations. Heroic battles, esoteric character systems, medieval European pastiche, player control of the narrative, etc …

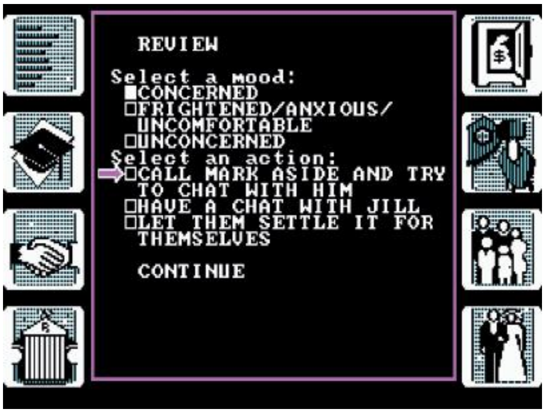
However, few games express the idea of role-playing quite like *Alter Ego*. Helmed by Peter J. Favaro, a child psychologist, the game is more concerned with the endless permutations of mundane modern life than with slaying orcs or uncovering conspiracies.



You and the woman of your dreams are taking a weekend trip with Jill and Mark, a couple you have known for a long time. During the trip you notice Mark becoming irritable, having loud, public discussions about very personal matters and drinking heavily. You are beginning to think that Mark is an alcoholic.

PRESS SPACE TO CONTINUE

Based on several interviews by a psychologist on memorable life events, *Alter Ego* touches on family, relationships, work, drugs and sexual life



REVIEW

Select a mood:
■CONCERNED
☐FRIGHTENED/ANXIOUS/
UNCOMFORTABLE
☐UNCONCERNED
Select an action:
⇨☐CALL MARK ASIDE AND TRY
TO CHAT WITH HIM
☐HAVE A CHAT WITH JILL
☐LET THEM SETTLE IT FOR
THEMSELVES

CONTINUE

After each event you're shown moods and actions you can choose in reply; the outcome is based on your personality and past history

In *Alter Ego* you'll play through key life events with probability altering statistics behind them. It starts with a series of questions, akin to those in *Ultima IV*, which determine the character's initial personality. Afterwards, the player can choose one of seven life stages to begin from, or start all the way from the womb.

Gameplay consists of selecting a series of themed vignettes represented by symbols for love, family, career, etc. Each scenario presents the player with an age-appropriate situation and offers choices as to how to react. Honest answers or true role-playing are both options, as is kicking the hornet's nest in order to put one's avatar through the wringer. These choices impact character relationships, finances, career and health through a set of statistics. Though most stats are visible, worrying about them isn't necessary for play. Becoming wrapped up in stats in *Alter Ego* is missing the point.

So many RPGs claim that no two games will play the same, but *Alter Ego* provides such a wide variety of esoteric situations that it feels like it delivers. You can become a money-hungry business tycoon or be murdered in an alley. Remain single or take a spouse. Die alone or die surrounded by family. When a game ends, you're tempted to start over to see what would have happened if you had just chosen differently – a ludic expression of an all too common real-life dilemma.

One major criticism of *Alter Ego* is that it definitely feels of its time. Originally sold in separate "male" and "female" versions, the game is rather sexist sometimes, fails to account for homosexual/bisexual relationships or being a single parent, and seems to reward playing according to '80s conservative values.

Regardless, *Alter Ego* remains essential to this day, especially for fans of modern adventure games such as Telltale's offerings. Haven't you ever wondered what it would be like to live a different life? **GB**

Quarterstaff

Simulated Environment System, 1987
Mac, PC-98 and X68k

Quarterstaff is an oddity among '80s RPGs – not only is it a Mac exclusive, it's also a rare attempt to mix RPGs with text adventures in the style of Infocom's *Zork*. So much in their style that Infocom purchased it, expanding and re-releasing it in 1988.

Set entirely inside a dungeon, the game plays as a more complex cousin of Choose-Your-Own-Adventure books like *Fighting Fantasy*, as you move room to room using text commands to solve puzzles and encounters.

This blend of text-based interactions with RPG encounters allows for richly described areas and elaborate events. In your quest to uncover the secrets of the dungeon, one of the first encounters is with a torturer and his personal guard. As soon as the encounter starts, the torturer will try to shackle you or your companion, then take the key and lock himself inside an iron cage while his guard battles you.

It's a powerful experience when it works, but has the downside of promising more than it can deliver. Seeing interactions like that, and the vast number of items available, can excite you to try clever solutions, as in a tabletop RPG or immersive sim, only to see them fail. Using the torturer as example, you can only kill the torturer or quickly shackle him before he shackles you. Talking your way out is not an option – *Quarterstaff* does not have a dialogue system.

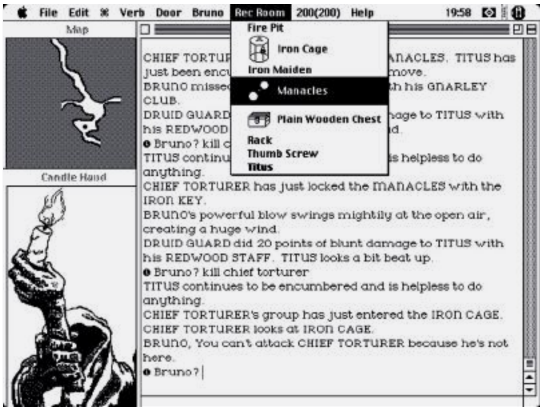
Similarly, the game's companions have no dialogue, goals or backstory, you just repeatedly smile at them (or bribe them) until they turn friendly and join you. On one hand, the game does offer more interactions than most RPGs at the time. On the other, that makes its limitations feel even more restrictive.

On the adventure game side, it delivers intricate puzzles, requiring you to navigate mazes, solve riddles and gather specific items. The game's box even came with a coin and parchment required to solve puzzles.

In true Infocom fashion, failing will often result in death. Indeed, the game is quite brutal – even if you solve all puzzles, you might find yourself too injured to defeat the next opponent, or take too long and die of hunger – forcing you to restart until you figure out the optimal route across the dungeon.

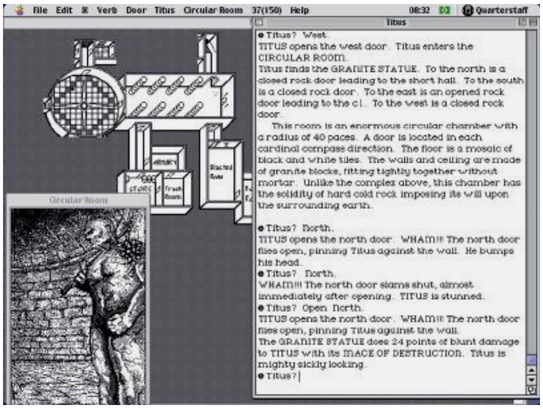
At its best, *Quarterstaff* feels like a predecessor to immersive sims – its shortcomings highlighting how complex and masterfully crafted those games are. **FE**

Quarterstaff was one of the many CRPGs that StarCraft Inc. released in Japan, fully translating it and porting it to PC-98 and Sharp X68000 computers.



```
CHIEF TORTUR                              ANACLES. TITUS has
just been encu                            move.
BRUNO misse                               h his GNARLEY
CLUB.
DRUID GUARD                               age to TITUS with
his REDWOOD                               d.
● Bruno? kill c
TITUS continu                             s helpless to do
anything.
CHIEF TORTURER has just locked the MANACLES with the
IRON KEY.
BRUNO's powerful blow swings mightily at the open air,
creating a huge wind.
DRUID GUARD did 20 points of blunt damage to TITUS with
his REDWOOD STAFF.  TITUS looks a bit beat up.
● Bruno? kill chief torturer
TITUS continues to be encumbered and is helpless to do
anything.
CHIEF TORTURER's group has just entered the IRON CAGE.
CHIEF TORTURER looks at IRON CAGE.
BRUNO, You can't attack CHIEF TORTURER because he's not
here.
● Bruno? |
```

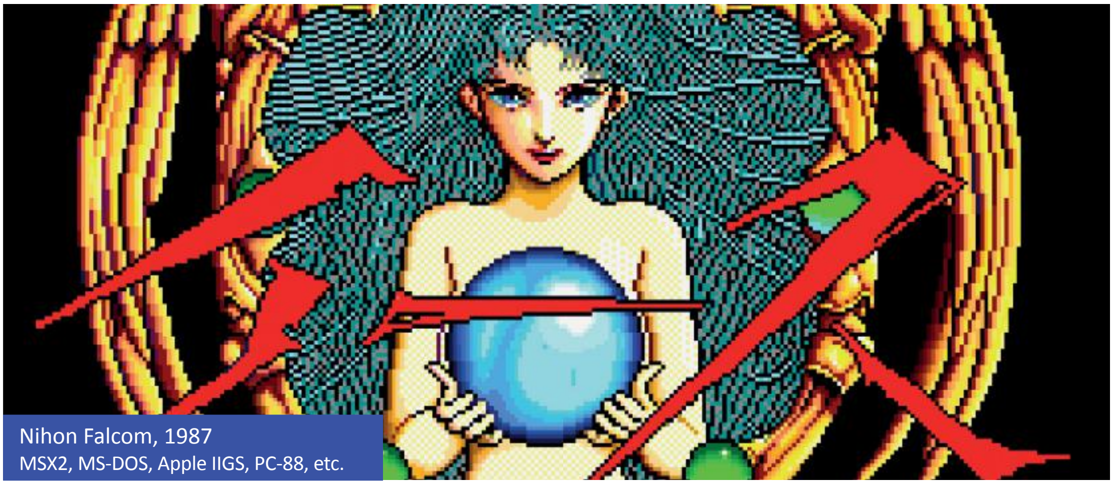
The game allows you to type commands or pick them from drop-down menus that show all the items, NPCs and actions possible for each party member



```
● Titus?  West.
TITUS opens the west door.  Titus enters the
CIRCULAR ROOM.
Titus finds the GRANITE STATUE.  To the north is a
closed rock door leading to the short hall.  To the south
is a closed rock door.  To the east is an opened rock
door leading to the c l.  To the west is a closed rock
door.
    This room is an enormous circular chamber with
a radius of 40 paces.  A door is located in each
cardinal compass direction.  The floor is a mosaic of
black and white tiles.  The walls and ceiling are made
of granite blocks, fitting tightly together without
mortar.  Unlike the complex above, this chamber has
the solidity of hard cold rock imposing its will upon
the surrounding earth.

● Titus?  North.
TITUS opens the north door.  WHAM!!! The north door
flies open, pinning Titus against the wall.  He bumps
his head.
● Titus?  North.
WHAM!!! The north door slams shut, almost
immediately after opening.  TITUS is stunned.
● Titus?  Open  North.
TITUS opens the north door.  WHAM!!! The north door
flies open, pinning Titus against the wall.
The GRANITE STATUE does 24 points of blunt damage
to TITUS with its MACE OF DESTRUCTION.  Titus is
mighty sickly looking.
● Titus? |
```

Renamed *Quarterstaff: The Tomb of Setmoth,* the 1988 re-release greatly polished the game, adding better images, an improved interface and revised text

Ys:
The Vanished Omens



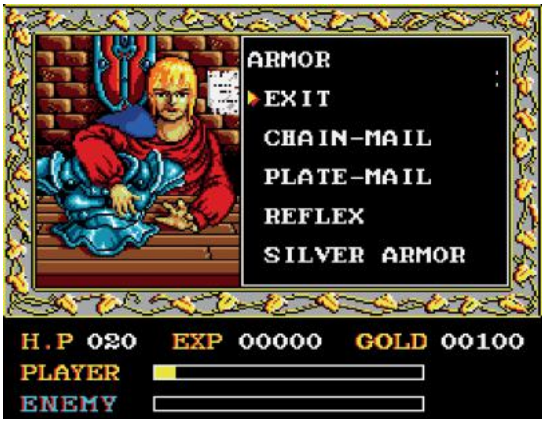
Nihon Falcom, 1987
MSX2, MS-DOS, Apple IIGS, PC-88, etc.

Nihon Falcom was one of the most important Japanese game developers. In the '80s it stood side-by-side with Square and Enix, but focused on the Japanese PC market – one of the reasons why it isn't as well-known in the West.

There were a number of action-based RPGs in the early days of Japanese computer games, such as T&E Soft's *Hydlide* (1984) and System Sacom's *Märchen Veil* (1985), but the most well-known is Falcom's *Ys* (pronounced "eese"). The company had previously eschewed turn-based RPGs in earlier games like *Dragon Slayer* (1984) and *Xanadu* (1985), but *Ys* was more ambitious.

It tells the story of red-haired hero Adol Christin and his journey to uncover the legendary land of Ys, which had broken free from its spot on the Earth and flown into the sky. With the help of a mysterious fortune teller, Adol learns of six magical books and two ancient goddesses of Ys, who have since descended from their thrones to live among humans.

The game was so large that it was split up into two separate games – the first, *Ancient Ys Vanished* (also known as *The Vanished Omens*) contains Adol's search for Ys, and the second, *The Final Chapter*, has him finding and exploring the sky-bound kingdom. In most modern re-releases, these are bundled together as a single release, which makes sense.



Boss battles can be difficult, forcing you to grind, but there are some items and equipment available at shops (or hidden) that can help you

The first *Ys* game consists only of two towns, a tiny overworld and three dungeons, one of which is so gigantic that it occupies about half of the game. The second game is much longer and more involved, sending Adol through lands of ice and fire before reaching the shrine where he can defeat the evil Darm.

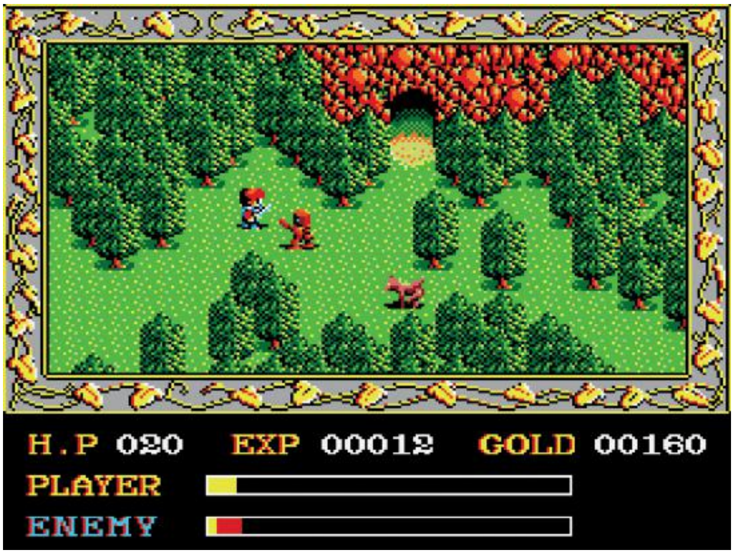
Like many early Japanese action RPGs, you fight enemies by bumping into them, and your rate of success is based on your experience level. However, your power is much greater if you hit the enemy at an off-angle. The second game introduces a magic system that allows Adol to throw fireballs, which is much easier to deal with. Amidst other combat spells, there's also a spell that turns you into a monster, allowing you to talk to other bad guys, whose various musings are not only funny but provide valuable hints.

It may all sound overly simplistic, considering that much of what one does is to roam the landscape, ramming into every enemy in sight, but that's really part of the fun. *Ys* doesn't bog itself down with puzzles or aimless wandering. For the most part, they're straightforward adventures that are fairly short, but full of the same sense of wonder and adventure that made the *Zelda* games so consistently popular.

Ys was originally released on the Japanese PC-8801 in 1987, but was ported to several home computer and consoles. It was released internationally on various platforms, first on the SEGA Master System, then on MS-DOS and Apple IIGS.

These were OK conversions, though the PC ports butchered the excellent soundtrack. They had limited success, but the TurboGrafx-16 version was included as a pack-in for the US TurboDuo console, leading to much greater exposure. This version also included new cinematics, professional voice acting and incredible redbook arrangements of the music.

> “Recent RPGs have been very difficult, and it takes a lot of willpower to finish them. So eventually we came to have our doubts: was this really ‘fun’? With *Ys*, therefore, we set out to create the opposite kind of game, something that would be accessible, easy to play, and not geared toward hardcore RPG maniacs.”
>
> *– Masaya Hashimoto,*
> Ys*’ programmer and designer*



In combat, all you have to do is bump into enemies, but you must do it slightly off-centre, as in the picture, for attacking head-on will likely just get you killed

Falcom has revised these two games several times over the years, most significantly starting in 1998 with the *Ys Eternal* games for Windows 95, which included an expanded world map for the first game, remade SVGA graphics, new music and smoother controls. These were later ported to the PSP and to modern PCs, then localised into English courtesy of XSeed. Other than among those who prefer the ’90s-era rock-synth soundtrack of the TurboGrafx-16 version, these are widely viewed as the definitive releases.

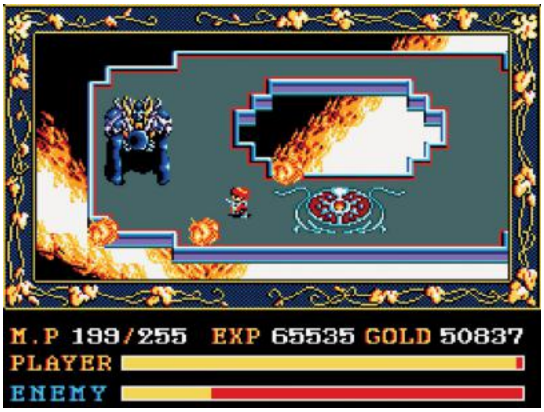
The *Ys* series has become Falcom’s flagship franchise over the years. While the first two *Ys* games tell a complete story, *Ys III: Wanderers from Ys* (1989) switches to a side-scrolling perspective and changes the setting to an entirely unrelated scenario. After this point, Falcom experienced a significant staff shortage, resulting in the fourth game getting licensed out to two companies for two very different titles, one for the Super Famicom, the other for the PC Engine.

Ys V (1995) was developed in-house by Falcom, though only for the Super Famicom, which attempted to modernise the series by replacing the “bump” system with a standard *Zelda*-style attack button.

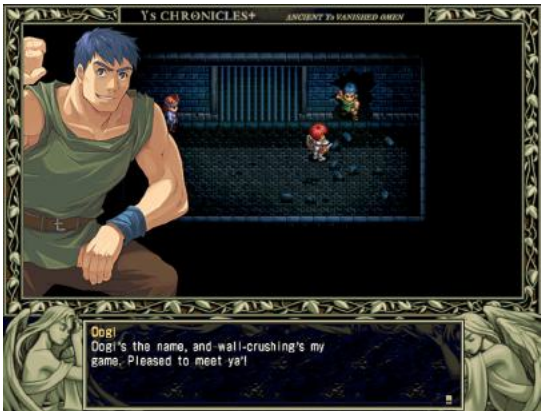
The series returned to PCs with *Ys VI: The Ark of Napishtim* (2003), which was something of a series re-birth, switching the background graphics to 3D (but keeping the 2D sprites). This engine was used for the next two games: *Oath in Felghana,* a remake of *Ys III*, and *Ys Origin*, a prequel with many storyline ties to the first two games. Falcom then shifted development back to handheld platforms, with *Ys VII* (2009) and *Ys: Memories of Celceta* (a remake of *Ys IV*).

Despite being one of the most important CRPGs in Japanese history, *Ys* never quite reached worldwide popularity on the scale of *Final Fantasy* or even *Dragon Quest*. A shame, for the series is full of fast-paced action and adventures in faraway lands, with some of the best music in the history of gaming. **KK**

The *Ys* series also inspired quite a few tie-ins, including a manga series, two separate anime OVAs and a whole series of soundtrack releases.



Ys II was only officially released in English for PCs in 2013, but the game is very light on text and was fan-translated



Oogi
Oogi's the name, and wall-crushing's my game. Pleased to meet ya'!

The remakes vastly expand and improve *Ys I* and *II*, but remain faithful to the series’ simple yet iconic gameplay

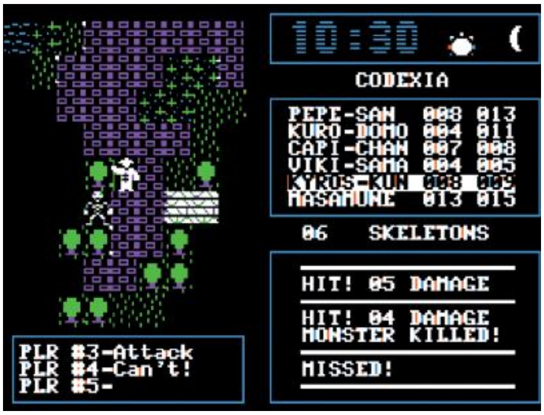
Deathlord

Al Escudero and David Wong, 1987*
Apple II and C64

***Released in 2022, the *Deathlord Relorded* pack lets you run the game on Windows with improved visuals, an expanded UI, a few balance tweaks and many bug fixes.**

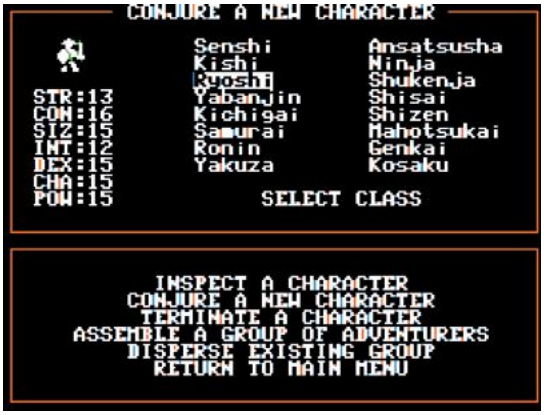
Some say *Wizardry IV* is the RPG that hates you the most. Others – the more elitist types, who snicker at something as mainstream as *Wizardry* – might name *Deathlord* instead.

Combining *Ultima's* top-down exploration with a *Wizardry*-like combat system, *Deathlord* takes place in an Oriental fantasy world with Japanese names for everything. As a result, *Deathlord* lets you play a Toshi and an Obake, a Mahotsukai and a Ronin.



```
10:30
CODEXIA
PEPE-SAN  008 013
KURO-DOMO 004 011
CAPI-CHAN 007 008
VIKI-SAMA 004 005
KYROS-KUN 008 009
MASAMUNE  013 015
06   SKELETONS
HIT! 05 DAMAGE
HIT! 04 DAMAGE
MONSTER KILLED!
MISSED!
PLR #3-Attack
PLR #4-Can't!
PLR #5-
```

Exploration and battles are all shown in an *Ultima*-like top-down view, but the combat system is actually very similar to that in *Wizardry*



```
CONJURE A NEW CHARACTER
         Senshi      Ansatsusha
         Kishi       Ninja
         Ryoshi      Shukenja
STR:13   Yabanjin    Shisai
CON:16   Kichigai    Shizen
SIZ:15   Samurai     Mahotsukai
INT:12   Ronin       Genkai
DEX:15   Yakuza      Kosaku
CHA:15
POW:15       SELECT CLASS

INSPECT A CHARACTER
CONJURE A NEW CHARACTER
TERMINATE A CHARACTER
ASSEMBLE A GROUP OF ADVENTURERS
DISPERSE EXISTING GROUP
RETURN TO MAIN MENU
```

Deathlord was originally inspired by Norse mythology, but five weeks before release EA demanded that the setting be changed to a Japanese one

There are eight races and 16 classes, including four Mage classes, each with its own compelling set of spells. The character system is solid, and every level-up brings you a significant increase in power, allowing you to brave areas you previously would not dare to.

And with *Deathlord's* 17 continents and archipelagos, there are a lot of areas to brave. This huge world may feel too empty at times, but the locations are consistently good. They have traps, clues and secrets to find. Many show more than they explicitly tell, by way of their surroundings and the NPCs that inhabit them, such as the masterful portrayal of the eternal yet unstable opposition between Fort Demonguard and Malkanth, the volcanic city of demons.

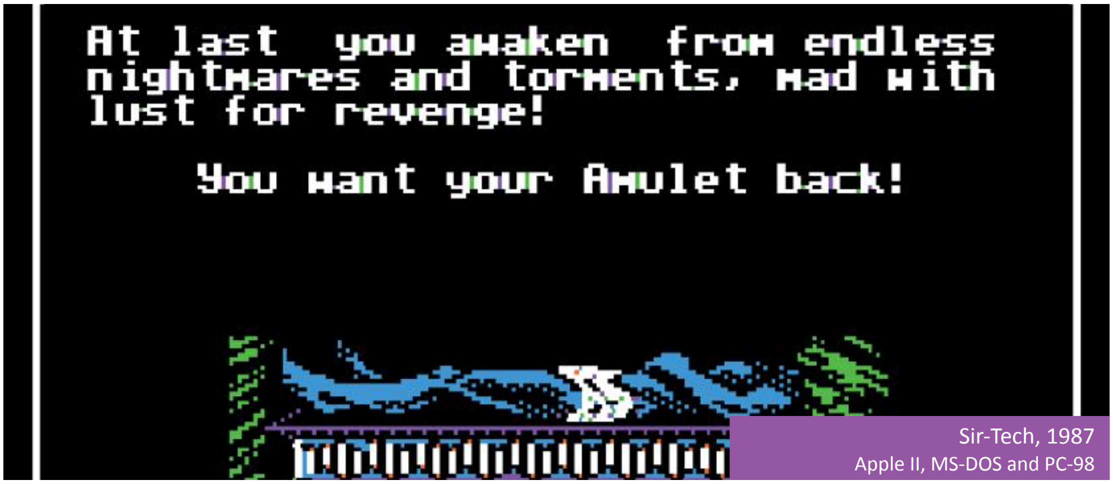
There are no quest objectives, or quests at all. There is only the starting clue that Deathlord, the game's villain, gives you. Further clues are obscure and difficult to find. There are some places, such as prisons or private residences, that you cannot simply enter; you can only break into them, with the consequence of angering on the entire town's guard.

However, you might learn something valuable if you do take the risk – all the greater given the game's permadeath save system with only one automatically-overwritten slot.

The ingenuity of *Deathlord's* design is to make its blend of *Ultima* exploration and *Wizardry* combat flow really well despite the difficulties involved in bringing traditional dungeon hazards – chutes, secret doors, teleporters, etc. – over to a top-down perspective. Most dungeons have a unique theme, and are as unforgiving as they are inventive. You will not make it far without mapping them out, and some secrets are only noticeable if you study the map.

To an enthusiastic dungeon crawler, *Deathlord* is one of the ultimate games. **CB**

Wizardry IV:
The Return of Werdna



```
At last you awaken from endless
nightmares and torments, mad with
lust for revenge!

    You want your Amulet back!
```

Sir-Tech, 1987
Apple II, MS-DOS and PC-98

Wizardry IV: The Return of Werdna, is not just the fourth game in the legendary *Wizardry* series – it's famously the hardest game in the history of CRPGs. The majority of those who have played the game were unable to leave the very first room. Incidentally, *Wizardry IV* remains to this day one of the most innovative of RPGs.

Wizardry IV turns the standard RPG premise on its head. In this game you play Werdna, the villain you defeated back in *Wizardry I*, trying to escape his escape-proof underground prison. Stripped of his powers, Werdna starts out extremely weak.

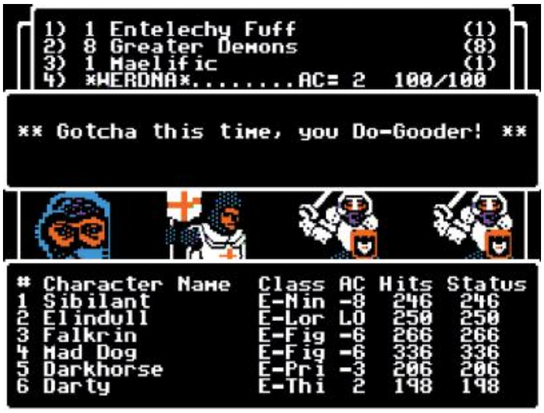
Doing away with the customary experience-based character development system, the game has you rely on summoned monsters and only increases your power at magical pentagrams – specific, sparsely placed points in the dungeon – so that your power is directly tied to your progress. Allied with monsters, you battle parties of adventurers fully intent on banishing you back to your eternal rest. Simply put, *Wizardry IV* has you fight as a monster party against an adventuring party.

Monsters are, however, an unruly bunch. They do not follow Werdna's orders directly. To make things worse, most enemies you encounter – Werdna sarcastically dubs them "do-gooders" – can kill you in one or at most two hits, and you tend to encounter them every other step. An unlucky roll of a die, a wrong step or a foolish decision, and bam! you're dead and have to reload the game.

Beginning at the bottom of the dungeon, you struggle to climb up to the surface. Useful loot is minimal, being mostly limited to puzzle-related items, and there's no way of telling a plot-critical item from a fluff one beforehand. And even if by some miracle the enemies don't get you, the dungeon itself will.

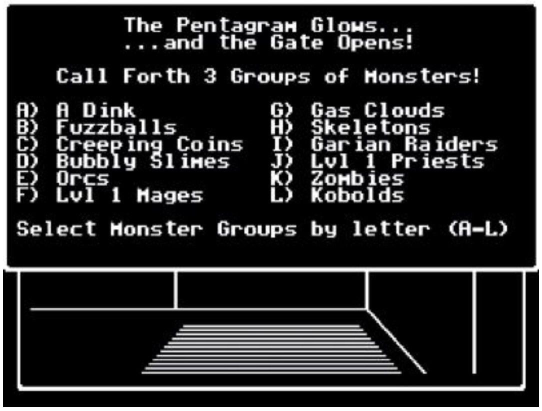
To that end, *Wizardry IV* features the most sadistic, and brilliant, dungeon and puzzle design; no other RPG, except maybe *Chaos Strikes Back* or *The Dark Heart of Uukrul*, can compete with. The dungeon itself is basically one large puzzle that you must figure out to progress or indeed survive.

If you're in the mood for some fantastic and incredibly punishing dungeons, be sure to check out *Wizardry IV*. **CB**



```
1) 1 Entelechy Fuff                (1)
2) 8 Greater Demons                (8)
3) 1 Maelific                      (1)
4) *WERDNA*........AC= 2   100/100

** Gotcha this time, you Do-Gooder! **

# Character Name    Class AC Hits Status
1 Sibilant          E-Nin -8  246   246
2 Elindull          E-Lor LO  250   250
3 Falkrin           E-Fig -6  266   266
4 Mad Dog           E-Fig -6  336   336
5 Darkhorse         E-Pri -3  206   206
6 Darty             E-Thi  2  198   198
```

The enemies you face are actually other players' parties from previous games that were submitted to Sir-Tech by mail

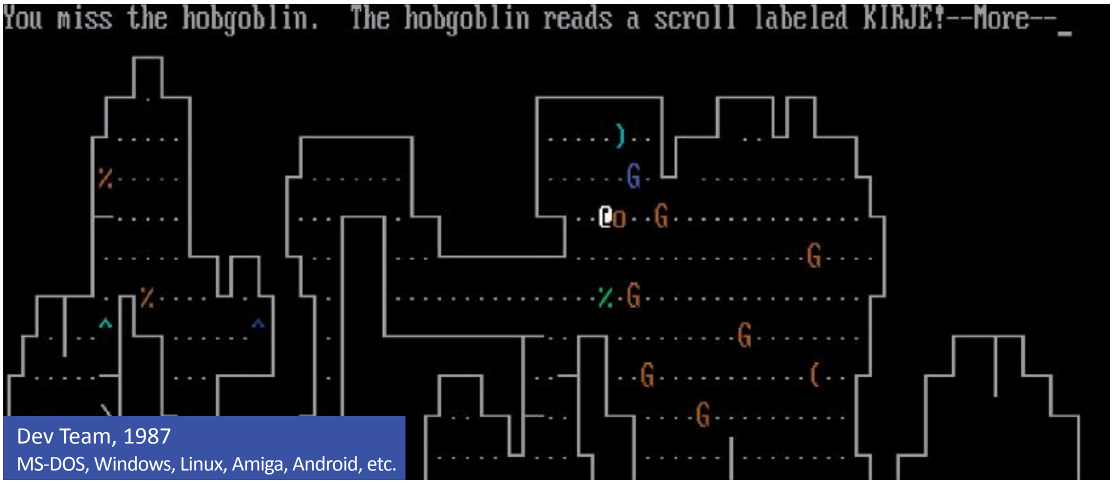


```
          The Pentagram Glows...
          ...and the Gate Opens!

       Call Forth 3 Groups of Monsters!

A) A Dink                G) Gas Clouds
B) Fuzzballs             H) Skeletons
C) Creeping Coins        I) Garian Raiders
D) Bubbly Slimes         J) Lvl 1 Priests
E) Orcs                  K) Zombies
F) Lvl 1 Mages           L) Kobolds

Select Monster Groups by letter (A-L)
```

Each pentagram offers a different set of monsters to be summoned

***Wizardry IV* was delayed for many years. During the development, Robert Woodhead and Roe Adams III began to subtitle Japanese anime as a hobby, later founding AnimEigo, an official anime distributor.**

NetHack



```
You miss the hobgoblin.  The hobgoblin reads a scroll labeled KIRJE!--More--_
```

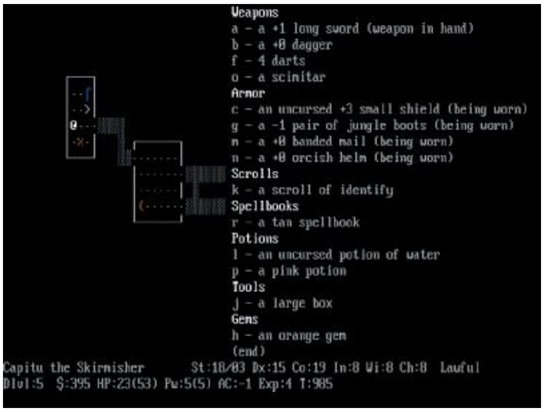
Dev Team, 1987
MS-DOS, Windows, Linux, Amiga, Android, etc.

NetHack is one of the "major" Roguelikes. Like *Rogue*, it sends players into a large, randomly generated dungeon that gets tougher as they descend. Also like *Rogue*, the goal is the Amulet of Yendor, which they must escape with once found. But the devil, as they say, is in the details.

***NetHack* is free and open-source. Download the latest version at www.nethack.org.**

NetHack is a game with fearsome complexity – the logic of its world defies belief: a player can take a potion, dip it into a fountain to dilute it with water, then drop it on a co-aligned altar and pray to turn it into holy water. Then he can dip another item to bless it, or instead dip a pile of other potions of water into it at once to make lots more holy water in a single go. Or he could throw it at a monster to attack it with its vapour, mix it with other potions, or dip other items into it. Rumour has it the player can even drink them.

That's just a quick overview of one of its features. Even if I wrote just one grossly vague sentence on each aspect of the game, it would require an entire book. Despite this overwhelming depth and its reputation for being extremely challenging for new players, *NetHack* is also almost always winnable.



```
Weapons
a - a +1 long sword (weapon in hand)
b - a +0 dagger
f - 4 darts
o - a scimitar
Armor
c - an uncursed +3 small shield (being worn)
g - a -1 pair of  jungle boots (being worn)
m - a +0 banded mail (being worn)
n - a +0 orcish helm (being worn)
Scrolls
k - a scroll of identify
Spellbooks
r - a tan spellbook
Potions
l - an uncursed potion of water
p - a pink potion
Tools
j - a large box
Gems
h - an orange gem
(end)
Capitu the Skirmisher      St:18/03 Dx:15 Co:19 In:8 Wi:8 Ch:8  Lawful
Dlvl:5  $:395 HP:23(53) Pw:5(5) AC:-1 Exp:4 T:985
```

NetHack offers 13 classes, 5 races and 39 skills, but its real depth comes not from character development, but items, monsters and their interaction with the complex sub-systems

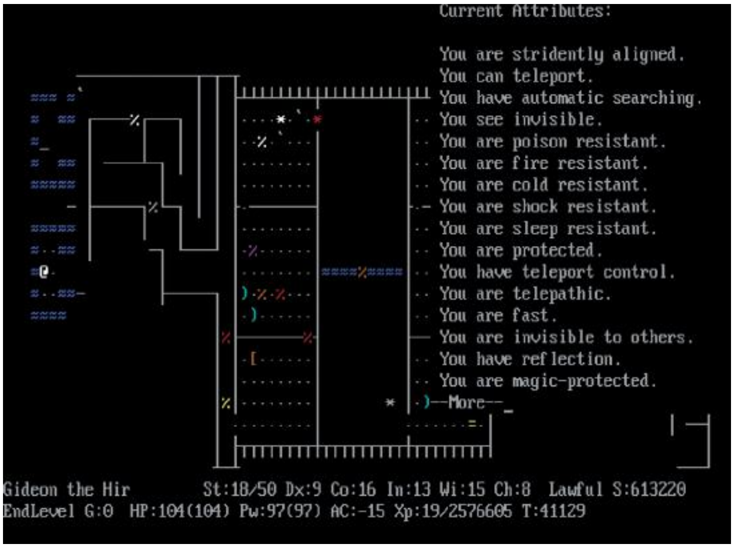
The path to becoming good enough to "ascend" (win the game) takes unaided players years, but with guides and heavy spoilers can be crossed in weeks. *NetHack* demands a lot from players, but it's a carefully balanced game that promotes experimentation and even has its own internal system of hints, in the form of fortune cookies and pronouncements by an Oracle.

Players also write a lot about *NetHack* online. You can read about monsters and their abilities, the dungeon and its contents, the best ways of traversing levels, the many, many ways in which one can die, etc. There are also the YAAPs (Yet Another Ascension Post), where players tell of their victories, often role-playing or with optional challenges in the form of "conducts" – being vegan, atheist, pacifist or even playing the entire game with their characters wearing blindfolds.

The process of playing *NetHack* requires levelling up, like most RPGs, but even more important than that is finding the items needed to complete the quest. We might say that a player's power is item-bound – a Level 1 player with excellent equipment is more powerful than a naked Level 10 character. A good item found randomly on the dungeon floor (or provided by a lucky magical wish) can greatly change the game. This helps *NetHack* to remain interesting through many plays, even if the player doesn't get very far.

One can consider *NetHack* to have three major phases: early, mid and late game. The early game is the most challenging, as the player is low-level, doesn't know what most things are, and is preparing his "ascension kit" – the items he'll need to win. By contrast, the long mid-game period is pretty boring, due to the monotonous maze levels and the scarcity of testing moments for a knowledgeable player. The end game provides several novel situations that liven the game up, but a properly prepared player will probably be able to handle them.

> "Most titles run their course because they can only be played so many times before becoming repetitive. That cannot be said about *NetHack.* People who have been playing the game for years still get excited when something good happens to them, when they ascend, when they discover something that the dev team thought of that impresses them."
>
> *– Paul Winner,*
> NetHack*'s developer*



```
Current Attributes:

You are stridently aligned.
You can teleport.
You have automatic searching.
You see invisible.
You are poison resistant.
You are fire resistant.
You are cold resistant.
You are shock resistant.
You are sleep resistant.
You are protected.
You have teleport control.
You are telepathic.
You are fast.
You are invisible to others.
You have reflection.
You are magic-protected.
--More--

Gideon the Hir        St:18/50 Dx:9 Co:16 In:13 Wi:15 Ch:8  Lawful S:613220
EndLevel G:0  HP:104(104) Pw:97(97) AC:-15 Xp:19/2576605 T:41129
```

The complexity of *NetHack* is legendary – it has hundreds of items, monsters, effects and variables, yet they all interact with each other in logical ways, leading to the popular mantra among players: "the dev team thinks of everything"

NetHack is an open-source game, and this has resulted in the creation of several variants, fan-made versions that seek to remedy some of its flaws or add new features. There are several variants: *NetHack: The Next Generation*, adds a "geek" class and many Douglas Adams references; *UnNetHack* improves the UI and ramps up randomness to increase variety; *Slash'EM Extended* adds even more stuff to the game, like new classes and races; and so on.

Most variants, as tends to be the way when fans make mods, are even harder than the original game, and are even more heavily reliant on spoilers. The most popular of these changes are sometimes adopted by the developers back into the original game.

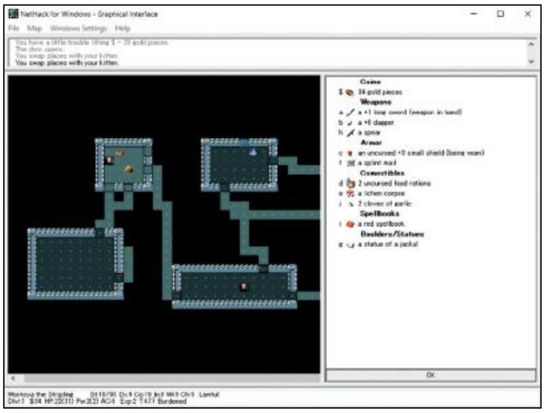
While many players prefer the efficiency of the ASCII graphics, *NetHack* comes with the option to play using a graphical tileset. There are many custom ones, and fans have also created the *Vulture's Eye* client, which provides a GUI, music and an isometric look.

NetHack is a descendant of *Hack*, a 1982 variant of *Rogue* created by Jay Fenlason during college. In 1987 the dev team re-wrote *Hack* and released it on the Usenet (an early Internet), adding the "*Net*" prefix. While updates have been irregular since then, the game is still under active development – in late 2016, they released version 3.6.0 after a hiatus of six years.

The dev team is devoted but busy, and mortality has begun to take its toll. With over thirty years of history on their backs, team members who were college students when they began working on *NetHack* are now in their fifties, or older. While its original members age, as do all human beings, the team has brought in a steady supply of new blood, some of them creators of balance variants, and so new ideas have infiltrated the game.

What will *NetHack* become under the stewardship of these newcomers? Not even the Oracle may say with certainty. **JH**

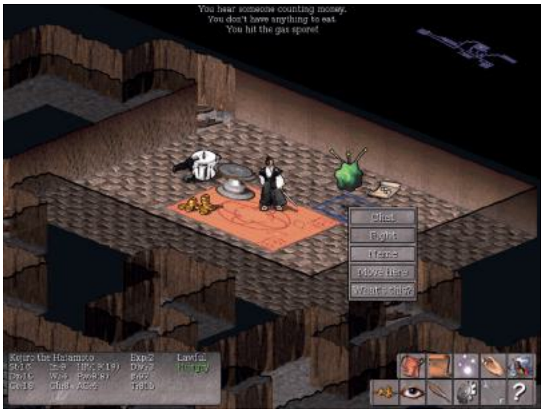
Newcomers should check the handy beginner's guide on www.nethackwiki.com. It provides important tips without going into spoilers. Having a list with the keyboard commands is also advisable.



You have a little trouble lifting $ - 28 gold pieces.
The door opens.
You swap places with your kitten.
You swap places with your kitten.

Coins
$ 34 gold pieces
Weapons
a a +1 long sword (weapon in hand)
b a +0 dagger
h a spear
Armor
c an uncursed +3 small shield (being worn)
f a splint mail
Comestibles
d 2 uncursed food rations
e a lichen corpse
i 2 cloves of garlic
Spellbooks
l a red spellbook
Boulders/Statues
g a statue of a jackal

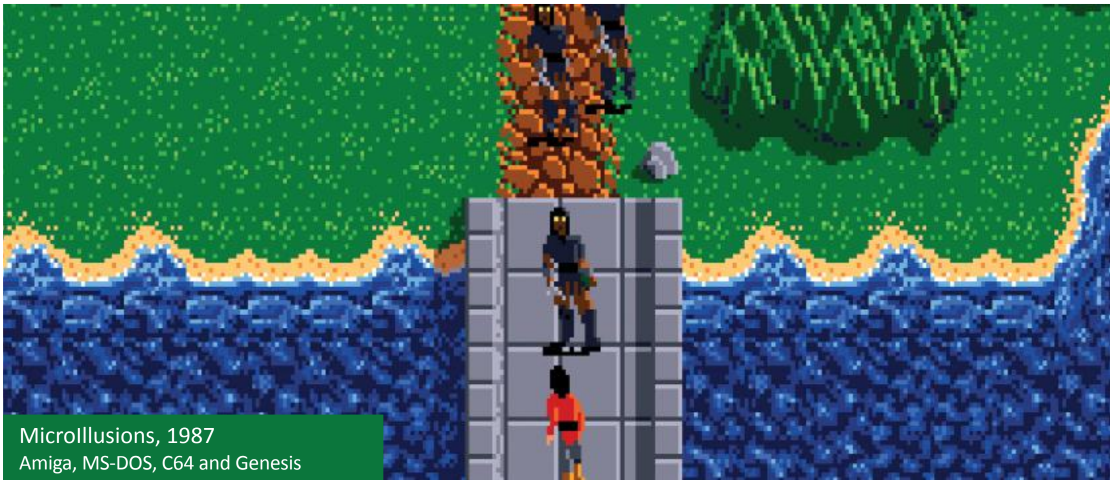
NetHack also supports a variety of tilesets, which replace the ASCII graphics and make things easier for newcomers



You hear someone counting money.
You don't have anything to eat.
You hit the gas spore!

NetHack's variants and graphical mods can be more accessible, such as *Vulture (pictured above), WazHack* and *Pathos*

The Faery Tale Adventure

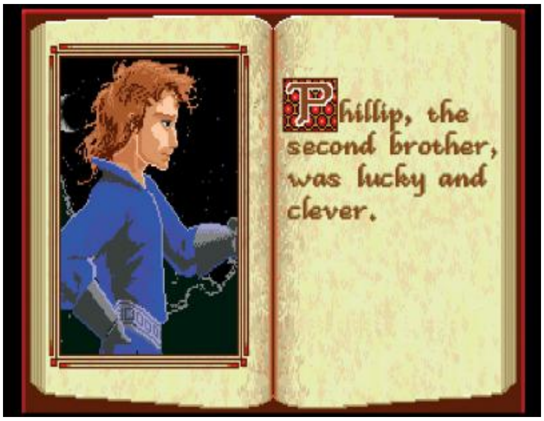

MicroIllusions, 1987
Amiga, MS-DOS, C64 and Genesis

David Joiner's career as a game designer began with him surreptitiously writing a "space war" game on a mainframe at U.S. Strategic Air Command headquarters and ended with him working on *SimCity 4* and *The Sims 2*.

Created entirely by David Joiner in seven months, *The Faery Tale Adventure* was perhaps the first RPG original on the Amiga. In good fairytale fashion, the background story consists of a necromancer kidnapping the king's daughter while unleashing a plague of monsters upon the land of Holm.

Three brothers from the village of Tambry have taken up arms to save the realm, but the player controls only a single brother at a time, starting with Julian, the eldest. If Julian's luck should run out – dying gradually diminishes it – then the next oldest, Phillip, falls under the player's control, and finally the youngest, Kevin. Reaching the remains of a deceased brother will yield whatever treasures he had accumulated, but otherwise each brother starts afresh and plays the same, aside from minor differences in starting attributes.

Exploration is the focus of the game, which is fortunate as it is easily its strongest aspect. Most of the challenge consists of discovering what exists in which locations, and what needs to be done to accomplish other tasks and ultimately win the game by reaching and defeating the necromancer.


Phillip, the second brother, was lucky and clever.

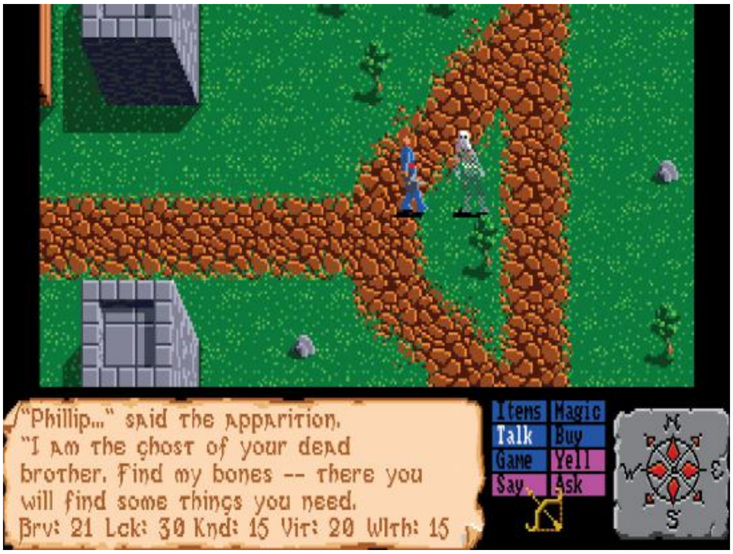
In true fairytale fashion, the game opens with a book-like presentation introducing the three brothers

Open-world before the term existed, *Faery Tale* confronts the player from the beginning with a vast land – equivalent to 17 thousand screens-worth of material – that can be explored in (nearly) any order one chooses, striding freely across open meadows, tundra, farmlands, dense and forbidding woods, deserts, bogs, and volcanic wasteland. Punctuating the landscape are various buildings, caverns and other indoor locations, sometimes named on the paper map accompanying the game. Showing the contours of the world and various sites scattered about it, the map is an essential tool and also serves as copyright protection, as when booting the game you're required to input three words from the rhyme wrapping around the map.

The immense charm of the game contributes greatly to the fun of exploration. Although the music consists of only half a dozen tracks, the game makes the most of them and of the Amiga's superior sound capabilities. Both the day- and night-time themes are superb, and will be interrupted by a tense battle theme as enemies randomly spawn on the fringes on the map and pursue you.

If the player tires of hiking, it is possible to gain the ability to summon a sea turtle that will graciously permit the brother to ride on its back over the seas, reaching otherwise inaccessible locations. Later still, a magic lasso permits the taming of a giant swan, allowing the brother to literally "wing forth in flight" as the rhyme indicates. Logistics are present in the game, not only in a day-night cycle (magical green jewels provide short-lived light), but also in the need for food and sleep. Going too long without buying food from an inn results in starvation eating away at the brother's vitality, but going too long without sleep means the brother will move in a drunken fashion, unable to walk a straight line!

> "I think I mostly made it up as I went along. In this, I think I was inspired by Jon Van Caneghem's approach to making *Might and Magic*, which was to start with a basic engine and then add detail like crazy. It's interesting too, because many years later in working on *SimCity 4* and *Sims 2* at Maxis, I ran into the same principle, which is this: there's really no way to measure how fun a game will be until you've built it, or at least built enough of it that you can start playing."
>
> *– David Joiner,*
> The Faery Tale Adventure*'s creator*



"Phillip..." said the apparition.
"I am the ghost of your dead
brother. Find my bones -- there you
will find some things you need.
Brv: 21 Lck: 30 Knd: 15 Vir: 20 Wlth: 15

The ghost of a deceased brother will urge the next-in-line to find his remains

Other RPG elements are relatively limited, however, contributing to the game's reputation as an "RPG lite". Each brother has only four attributes: Bravery, Luck, Kindness and Vitality. Success in combat depends on the Bravery attribute, which increases with victory in combat (as does Vitality, more slowly), creating a feedback loop in which a successful brother becomes powerful enough to trivialise combat.

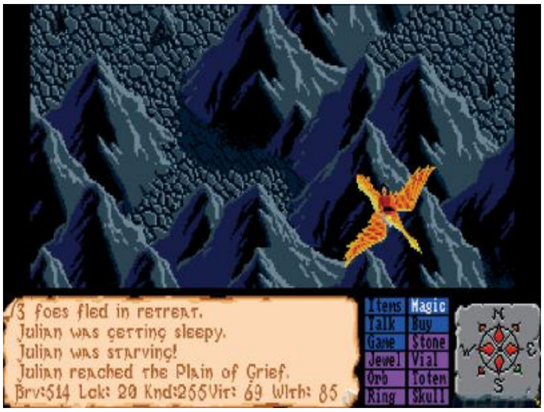
With few exceptions, there are only three types of enemy – skeletons, ogres and wraiths who look suspiciously like Nazgûl – all of which appear randomly and are defeated by pointing the brother in the right direction and pressing a button to attack.

The only other progression consists of accumulating gold pieces and inventory items. The game is spiced up with several magic items: for example blue stones allow teleportation between circles of stone pillars, while bird totems reveal maps showing the terrain around you, and gold rings briefly freeze time.

While it sold well, *Faery Tale Adventure* lacked any substantial impact on other RPGs of the time, and a sequel didn't appear until 1997. *Halls of the Dead: Faery Tale Adventure II* kept a focus on seamless exploration but radically revised gameplay, keeping the brothers together as a party and making combat turn-based. Sadly, the overambitious, mouse-driven controls combined with faulty path-finding made it difficult to even move the brothers around. Released after the bankruptcy of its developer, The Dreamer's Guild, *Halls of the Dead* also suffers from extensive last-minute cuts to content, and it passed with little notice.

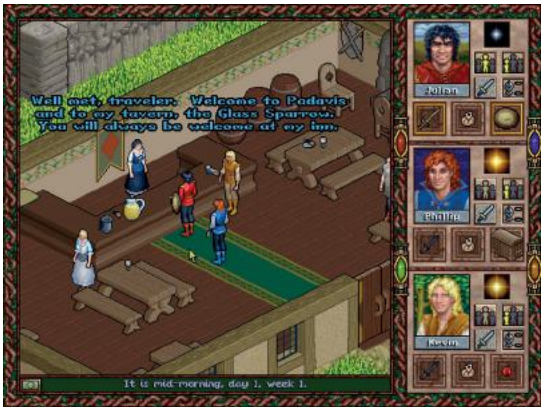
Nonetheless, the basic design of *FTA* pointed the way forward to the open-world "hiking simulators" of a later era. Those indifferent to its charms may find it monotonous, but despite its limitations *Faery Tale Adventure* will remain a sentimental favourite of those fortunate enough to have experienced it on its original platform. **ZD**

The game's manual includes a much more extensive background story, giving detail on the three brothers, their father, the village's talisman, and even the Red Knight, but this is entirely irrelevant to the actual gameplay.



/3 foes fled in retreat.
Julian was getting sleepy.
Julian was starving!
Julian reached the Plain of Grief.
Brv:514 Lck: 20 Knd:255Vir: 69 Wlth: 85

The giant swan allows you to quickly fly across the map, reaching new areas and avoiding a lot of combat



Well met, traveler. Welcome to Padavis
and to my tavern, the Glass Sparrow.
You will always be welcome at my inn.

It is mid-morning, day 1, week 1.

The sequel, *Halls of the Dead*, features an isometric view, expanded character options and full voice acting

Dungeon Master

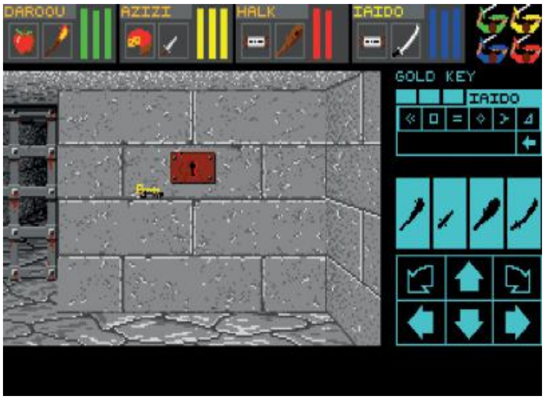
FTL Games, 1987
MS-DOS, Atari ST, Amiga, SNES, etc.*

***Dungeon Master* was a massive hit at the time, becoming the bestselling Atari ST game of all time and winning dozens of awards, including a "Special Award for Artistic Achievement" from Computer Gaming World.**

Dungeon Master is one of the games that has had the biggest impact on me. I'll never forget when I faced my first mummy. It was behind bars, I had a dagger, and to my joy throwing the dagger at the mummy through the bars actually worked! Immediately I knew this game was something special.

Dungeon Master was a revolutionary CRPG featuring a pseudo-3D world presented in first-person perspective. Players controlled a party of four characters that acted as a single "blob" (hence the term "blobber"), moving in real time from square to square. Controlling four characters in real time may sound like a daunting task, but the game is fairly slow and all actions take a certain time to execute, with the various types of attack having different speeds, so there is no frenetic clicking involved.

The combat is the weakest aspect of the game, since it's too easy to sidestep enemies, attack them, and sidestep again – the infamous Two Step Dance – but that is a general problem with all real-time first-person party- and tile-based RPGs – a.k.a. "blobbers". Apart from the combat, however, *Dungeon Master* was a step forward for RPGs in most respects.



While most other RPGs were still using text parsers, *Dungeon Master*'s interface was mouse-driven, graphical and very intuitive

The audiovisuals were unrivalled for a long time. *DM* was one of the first games to use 3D audio, so you could actually use sound to keep track of your enemies. And while there's only one type of dungeon graphics throughout the game, it looked very good.

Dungeon Master was also one of the first CRPGs to discard the traditional XP system, and instead used a system whereby skills increased with use, something later adopted by the *Elder Scrolls* games. The game did have the traditional character classes of Fighter, Priest, Wizard and Ninja, and characters could advance in all classes. Using melee weapons increases Fighter levels; using missiles and weapons, and generally throwing things increases Ninja levels; casting spells increases Wizard levels; making potions increases Priest levels.

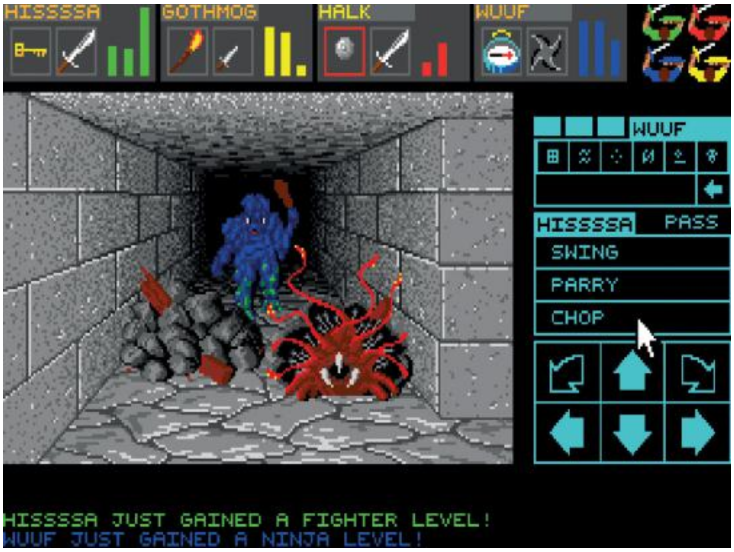
You don't create your own characters, but instead have to choose up to four heroes from The Hall of Champions. And what a colourful and diverse lot those champions are! Who can forget characters like Hisssssa, Wuuf the Bika or Halk the Barbarian?

Dungeon Master featured a wide assortment of enemies, from skeletons and mummies through shrieking, slow-moving trees to giant rats, scorpions and purple worms. And the most annoying creatures of them all: the Gigglers, who would run up to the party, steal an item, giggle and run away.

There wasn't really much of story in the game, but the manual included a well-written backstory to introduce players to the game. It tells that one day the Grey Lord found a Power Gem, but unleashing its power resulted in his essence splitting into two halves – a good wizard and the evil Lord Chaos. The player takes the role of Theron, Lord Grey's apprentice, who selects and controls the four champions. The task is to enter the dungeon, find the Firestaff and then use it to stop Lord Chaos.

"We had a hunch that *Dungeon Master* would do OK. I guess because we felt we were trying to do a type of game that had never been done before. That is a game that blends real-time action with a rich environment to play in. I guess the closest analogue to what we were trying to do was to create the dungeon equivalent of a flight simulator."

– Wayne Holder,
Dungeon Master*'s producer*



HISSSSA JUST GAINED A FIGHTER LEVEL!
WUUF JUST GAINED A NINJA LEVEL!

The various attacks have different speeds and power levels; characters can also throw their weapons and pretty much anything in their inventory

DM was followed by *Chaos Strikes Back* (1989), at first advertised as an expansion, but then released as a stand-alone game. It allowed you to import your characters from *DM* and also came with a Champion Editor tool, which allowed players to customise the Champions' names – and portraits, pixel by pixel.

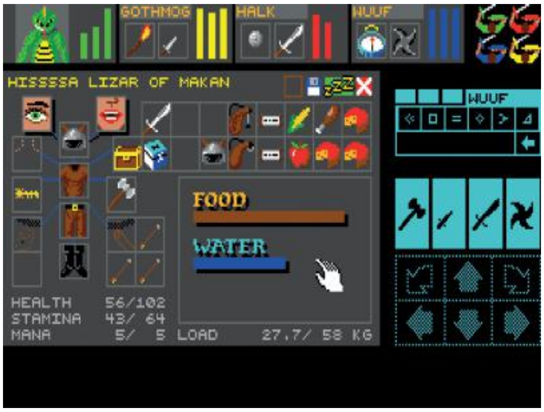
Chaos Strikes Back was like *Dungeon Master* on steroids, with even more deadly enemies, fiendish puzzles and possibly the most intricate 3D dungeon ever created, with all 13 levels interconnected via numerous stairs and pits. In my opinion, it was the ultimate game in the real-time blobber sub-genre of CRPGs. One of my best gaming moments ever was on a level containing both illusory walls and dragons. Unlike me, the dragons could see through the walls, and even breath fire through them. But I could hear each dragon stomping about, which meant I could locate them by sound and then do the "Two Step Dance" through the illusory walls!

Later RPGs would have prettier and more varied graphics, plus more of a story and better NPC interaction, but none could rival the level design and puzzles of *Dungeon Master* and *Chaos Strikes Back*.

Another thing that sets *DM* and *CSB* apart from later games is the interaction with the environment, from using doors and traps, to chopping and fireballing doors, to something as basic as throwing things through bars. For example, in *DM* a fireball actually has a physical presence in the dungeon and can burn wooden doors or be sent through teleporters.

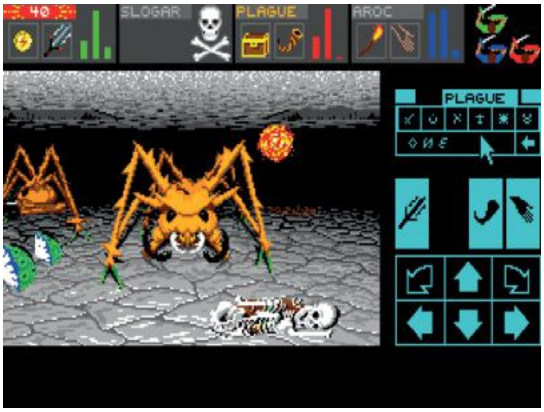
Dungeon Master is a landmark in gaming history, creating a new CRPG sub-genre and inspiring dozens of clones – even after *Ultima Underworld* appeared in 1992 with a natural evolution of the formula. However, all the real-time blobbers that followed were evolutionary dead ends; even though some of them were fun to play, for me they were all anti-climaxes after *Dungeon Master* and *Chaos Strikes Back*. **OC**

***Dungeon Master* still has an active community of fans who have created various ports (Windows, Java, Mac and Linux), tools and over a hundred custom dungeons for DM. Visit them at www.dungeon-master.com.**



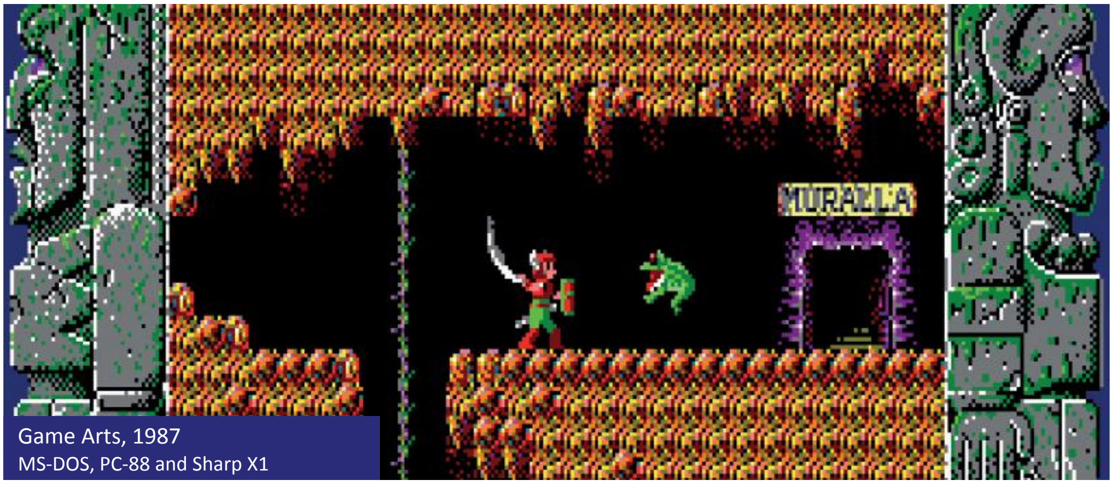
HEALTH 56/102
STAMINA 43/ 64
MANA 5/ 5 LOAD 27.7/ 58 KG

As if the dangers of the dungeon weren't enough, players still have to keep all their characters fed and hydrated



Spells are cast by inputting the correct runes at the right side of the screen – if your character has enough skill

Zeliard

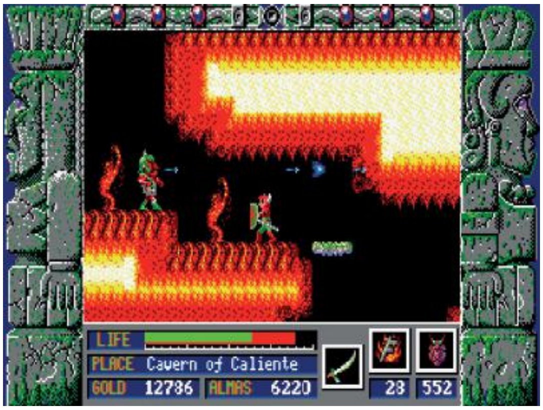


Game Arts, 1987
MS-DOS, PC-88 and Sharp X1

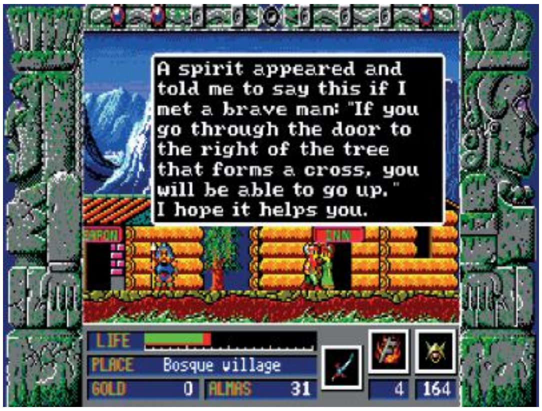
I remember *Zeliard* mainly for three reasons: the game is huge, extremely difficult and I only finished it a few years after my progress stalled in the final dungeon. When I first played it, I could barely understand English, so I missed an important hint.

The game was clearly inspired by Nihon Falcom's *Xanadu* (1985) but, while that game remained in Japan, *Zeliard* was actually translated into English, and released in the West in 1990.

As happened with many other games at the time, *Zeliard's* US box tries to mask the Japanese aesthetic of the game, featuring a viking on the cover instead of the manga-styled character who actually stars in the game.



There are special magic items you need to collect for exploration, such as a cape that protects you from heat


A spirit appeared and told me to say this if I met a brave man: "If you go through the door to the right of the tree that forms a cross, you will be able to go up." I hope it helps you.

The hints provided by the townsfolk are vital to uncovering secrets and finishing the game: be sure to write them down

One of the early "metroidvania" games, it set itself apart by having a slight influx of RPG elements. It features a hidden XP system that allows you level up when sages in town deem you experienced enough, increasing hit points, damage and magic.

Zeliard also has a simplistic inventory system: one slot for a weapon, one for armour and one for a shield – which will break after a certain number of hits. The various potions you can buy in towns regenerate health, raise magic, or damage or repair your shield.

You can attack with horizontal, upward and downward sword-slashes, and after defeating each boss monster, you will also get new spells – all of them offensive in nature. As in other "metroidvania" games, there are also items that grant you access to otherwise unreachable areas, such as boots to climb slopes, or a cloak to resist intense heat.

Zeliard stands out among its kind for recapturing the feeling of old-school CRPG dungeon crawlers. It cannot be mastered by just being good at the action part; you have to also map the entire game meticulously, explore every inch and also note down every hint the townspeople utter to succeed.

Mapping is made difficult both by the fact that later levels consist of two or three layers intricately interlinked and by a very unusual quirk of the overall topology: the maps are circular. Wherever you may be, if you go far enough right or left, up or down, you will end up where you started. It easy to get lost even in the first level, and without a map you won't get far in the later ones.

Zeliard's platforming mechanics have long been surpassed and its fusion of 2D action and RPG elements is by no means unique these days, but the overall dungeon design lets it stand in a class of its own, even today. If you enjoy a challenge, that is. **JG**

Alien Fires 2199 A.D.

Jagware Inc., 1987
Amiga, Atari ST and MS-DOS

The first thing to be said about *Alien Fires* is that it's not a good game. Most of its systems are broken or pointless. And yet, it's such an interesting title that it would be a disservice to not talk about it.

The manual explains that you are a Time Lord, sent by the enigmatic Elders to find a scientist by the name of Dr Samuel Kurtz. A genius, he built a time machine and wants to use it to go back to the Big Bang and witness the moment of Creation. You must stop him, as some secrets are not meant for mortal eyes.

It's a creative premise, and expectations remain high as you boot the game, see a colourful intro with a nice soundtrack, then reach character creation, where you'll distribute points between seven skills.

Once that's done, you board the oddly-shaped Galaxy's End space station. While almost every other dungeon crawler is built and navigated in a square grid, *Alien Fires* uses all sorts of odd angles and allows players to turn in increments of 45 degrees, making exploration and mapping quite a challenge.

You'll soon meet a friendly alien, who greets you not with text, but with voiced dialogue! Turns out *Alien Fires* uses the Amiga's text-to-speech feature to make its NPCs "speak"! The technology is primitive – every NPC has the exact same "voice" and it's often hard to understand what's being said. Not that it really matters, as all the game's dialogue is pointless.

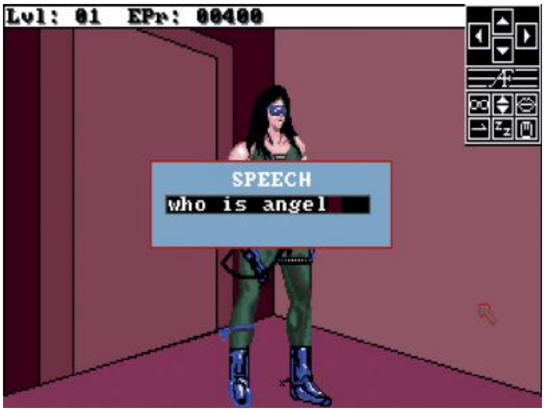
You'll talk to many exotic NPCs via a text parser, navigate oddly-shaped rooms and collect several keys and items, but it's all for nought. Keys are useless; NPCs won't say anything of value. All you really need to do is cross six small levels until you reach the last floor and find Dr Kurtz – then fight a shoehorned boss battle.

In fact, you could beat the game in a few minutes if not for the frequent random encounters. And here, once again, the game fails to provide any satisfaction.

During combat, you just press the "Fight" button and watch as your character and the enemy trade blows. There are no tactics involved, fights play mostly the same, and the most important factor is luck.

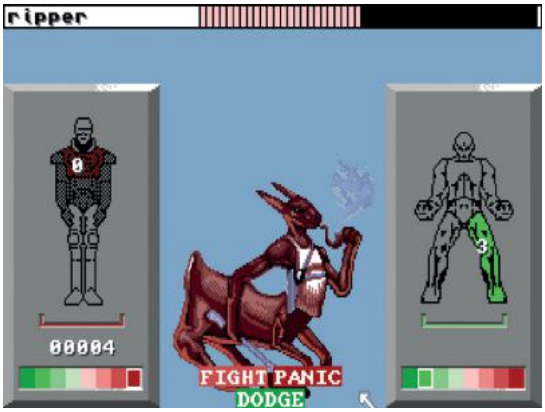
In the end, *Alien Fires* feels like an ambitious tech demo. The premise is original, the art and music are often great and ideas like using text-to-voice and creating dungeons in odd angles are interesting, but unfortunately, there's no real game beneath them. **FE**

***Alien Fires* was later ported to Atari ST and MS-DOS, losing the text-to-voice feature. The game hinted at a sequel and even asked players to keep their save file, but *Alien Fires 2* never arrived.**



who is angel

Dialogues use a text-to-voice system and a competent text parser, but the NPCs themselves have nothing of value to say



The game offers melee and ranged weapons, limited ammo, and armour for specific body parts, but during combat you just click on "Fight" and watch

Wasteland

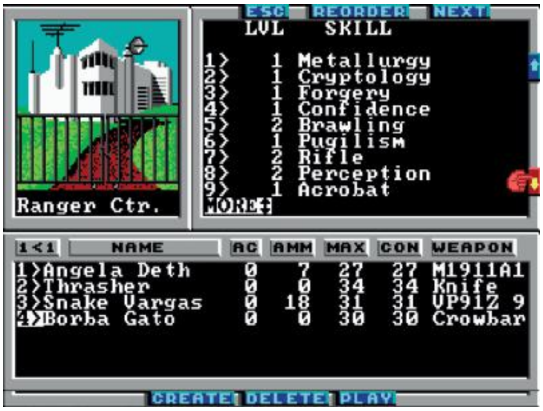
Interplay, 1988
MS-DOS, Apple II, C64 and Windows*

***_Wasteland_ was re-released in 2013 by inXile, featuring a new soundtrack and reworked art. It also included all the text in the game itself, with no need to check paragraphs in the manual. In 2020 they released _Wasteland Remastered_, also re-doing the art.**

I almost passed on *Wasteland* on the shelf of EB Games way back when. Like, way way back when. I had tried almost every other CRPG in the store, from the big companies like Interplay, SSI, Origin – checked out *Wizard's Crown*, *Bard's Tale*, *Ultima*, *Eternal Dagger*, *Might and Magic* … until *Wasteland* was the only thing left in the store.

Yet I didn't want to get it. It looked weird. Finally, two things lured me in: the *Bard's Tale* character layout screenshot on the back cover, and the *Interplay* name. I loved *Bard's Tale*, I trusted *Interplay*, and I trusted Brian Fargo. And when I sat down and plugged this spiritual ancestor to *Fallout* into my Commodore 64, I could not stop exploring this unique, highly imaginative world devastated by nuclear war.

I upheld Desert Ranger justice, communed with a drunken hobo who saw the future in Snake Squeezins, cloned my party members (!), repaired toasters, fired howitzers, got wasteland herpes from a three-legged hooker, and fought a menagerie of enemies from killer robots, giant garden pests and leather jerks to rad angels that glowed with a life of their own.



```
LVL   SKILL
1>     1 Metallurgy
2>     1 Cryptology
3>     1 Forgery
4>     1 Confidence
5>     2 Brawling
6>     1 Pugilism
7>     2 Rifle
8>     2 Perception
9>     1 Acrobat

1<1  NAME            AC  AMM  MAX  CON  WEAPON
1>Angela Deth        0    7   27   27  M1911A1
2>Thrasher           0    0   34   34  Knife
3>Snake Vargas       0   18   31   31  VP91Z 9
4>Borba Gato         0    0   30   30  Crowbar
```

Heavily derived from tabletop RPGs, *Wasteland* features seven attributes and over 30 skills, but not all of them are equally useful

At the end … I didn't want it to end (you can keep playing, too!). I was floored. I didn't realise CRPGs could be this way. I still refer to *Wasteland*'s mechanics in game design, a brilliant blend of area design context and RPG systems used to create amazing scenarios.

Wasteland has numerous strengths and weaknesses, but the strengths definitely overshadow the weaknesses. The area design, ambience, the system spread and applications, and the narrative itself were top-notch, while the system balance, attribute use, healing and the rare application of the ability to divide your party diminished the experience somewhat.

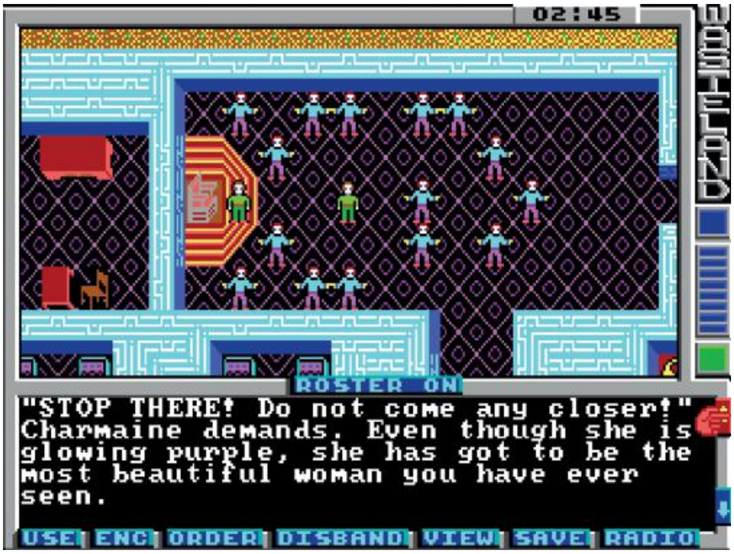
The narrative shines through in the game content itself, and also in the well- and amusingly-written narrative book included in the game, filled with richly described characters. The wasteland is simply an amazing blend of raider-occupied towns, mutant agricultural centres, robot factories, Las Vegas and even the inside of an android's brain, where I almost feared the game had jumped the shark.

The quests and encounters there are innovative and interesting, and although the overall quest doesn't kick into full gear until over halfway through the game, there's plenty to keep you going. The people of the world respond to your actions, even in the first area of the campaign, and remind you of the harsh world that you've found yourself in.

Wasteland comes with a slight learning curve not present in other RPGs at the time, reflected first in its character creation. Loosely based on the *Mercenaries, Spies and Private Eyes* tabletop RPG, its skill-based and attribute-based system is a bit more complex than say, in *Bard's Tale*, but allowed for richer character role-playing. If I wanted to create a Russian explosives expert who liked to throw knives, I could. And that was a much richer development tree than "Fighter."

"I think the things that drew people to *Wasteland* and *Fallout* are the similarities. […] There was this open sandbox world and we weren't preaching to you as to how to behave, in terms of a morality perspective. The 'correct' thing to do was never clear, and sometimes, there weren't clear, correct things. There was also a lot of cause and effect and a lot of subtlety; layers and layers of gameplay in a post-apocalyptic world, with an interesting combat system."

– Brian Fargo,
Wasteland*'s director*



```
"STOP THERE! Do not come any closer!"
Charmaine demands. Even though she is
glowing purple, she has got to be the
most beautiful woman you have ever
seen.
```

Cults, cults, and yet more cults, all willing to embrace you with radioactive, glowing arms

The system is elegant, difficult and confusing at the same time. The elegance comes in the simple mechanic of being able to select any attribute, item, or skill, and then select an object in the environment for that to act on. An adventure game mechanic taken to the extreme with brilliant results. If you want to use Intelligence on an object, you can. If you want to use your proton axe on a wall or door, you can.

It is touches like this where *Wasteland* shines. Similarly, the fact the skill tree grows beyond what's in the manual adds a powerful element of mystery, driving you to explore more of the world and see what's in the next library, making the world deeper.

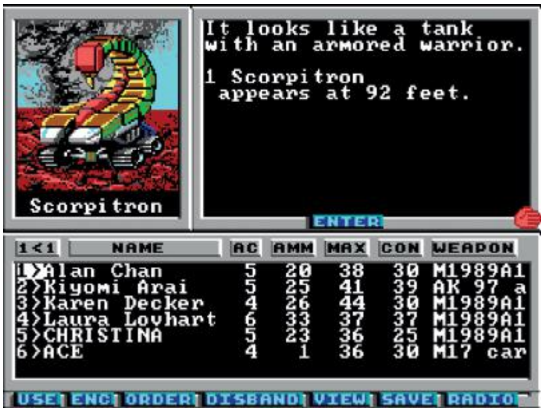
That said, *Wasteland* has its share of design confusion. It's difficult to see the differences in combat between Pugilism, Melee Weapons and Brawling. Some skills are largely useless, while others are critical (Doctor, for example). The same is true for stats: some attributes, such as Charisma, hold little value.

Wasteland also had an annoying auto-save function that could sometimes trap you in dead-end situations (some area designs can push you out of an area, say, by falling into a river and irradiating everyone, then saves the game right after, almost guaranteeing a slow death). This often forced me to quickly yank the disk or, when I was older, set up copies of the game to prevent being trapped with no hope of salvation.

Wasteland is one of the best role-playing games I've ever played, and it's echoed in the design philosophy and how they accomplish so much by exposing their systems to design. That, matched with the sheer creative brilliance of the levels and the novelty of the setting, has kept it in my heart for over 20 years, Scorpitrons, androids, bloodthirsty rabbits, and all.

I swore that if I ever had the chance, I'd work on a sequel, and, thanks to Brian Fargo, I got the opportunity with *Wasteland 2* (2014). I hope the next generation enjoys the wasteland as much as I did. **MCA**

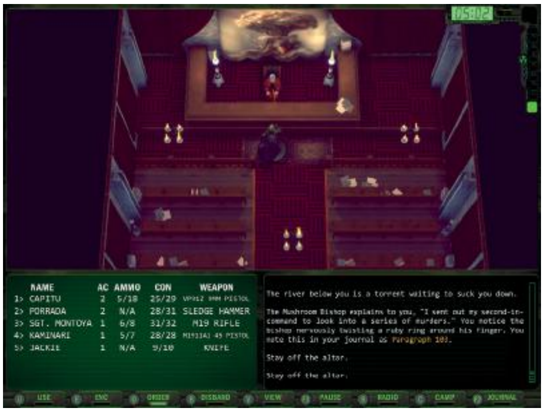
Due to memory limitations, most of the game's text is in the printed manual. The game then asks you to read certain paragraphs. To stop players from reading them early, fake ones were added, such as false codes and an entire storyline about a Martian invasion.



```
It looks like a tank
with an armored warrior.

1 Scorpitron
 appears at 92 feet.
```

```
1<1       NAME         AC  AMM  MAX  CON  WEAPON
1>Alan Chan            5   20   38   30  M1989A1
2>Kiyomi Arai          5   25   41   39  AK 97 a
3>Karen Decker         4   26   44   30  M1989A1
4>Laura Lovhart        6   33   37   37  M1989A1
5>CHRISTINA            5   23   36   25  M1989A1
6>ACE                  4    1   36   30  M17 car
```

Wasteland's combat is similar to that in *Bard's Tale*, but it also displays the position of all foes when you press Space

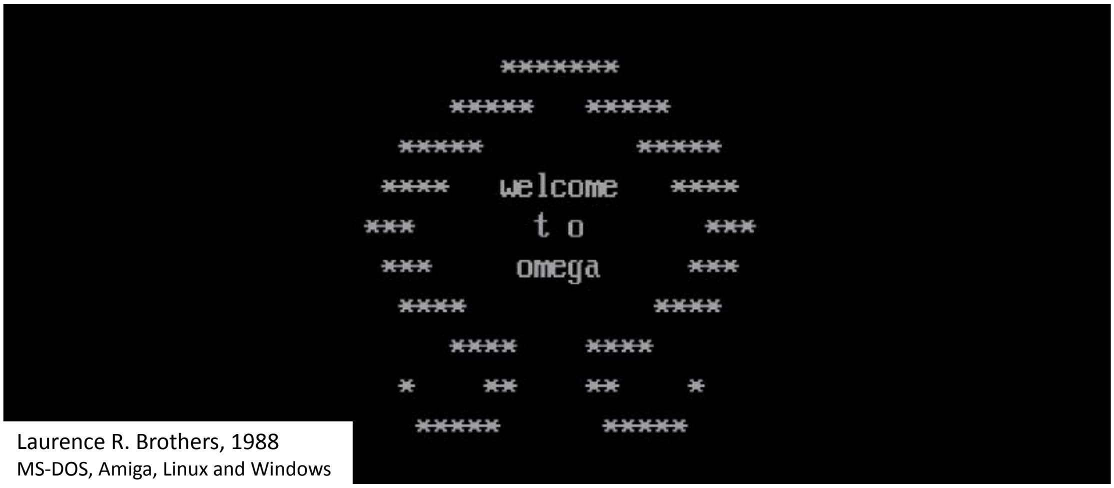


```
   NAME          AC  AMMO   CON     WEAPON
1> CAPITU        2   5/18   25/29  VP91Z 9MM PISTOL
2> PORRADA       2   N/A    28/31  SLEDGE HAMMER
3> SGT. MONTOYA  1   6/8    31/32   M19 RIFLE
4> KAMINARI      1   5/7    28/28  M1911A1 45 PISTOL
5> JACKIE        1   N/A    9/10     KNIFE
```

```
The river below you is a torrent waiting to suck you down.

The Mushroom Bishop explains to you, "I sent out my second-in-
command to look into a series of murders." You notice the
bishop nervously twisting a ruby ring around his finger. You
note this in your journal as Paragraph 103.

Stay off the altar.

Stay off the altar.
```

In 2020 inXile released *Wasteland Remastered*, an updated version of the game with new graphics and soundtrack

Omega

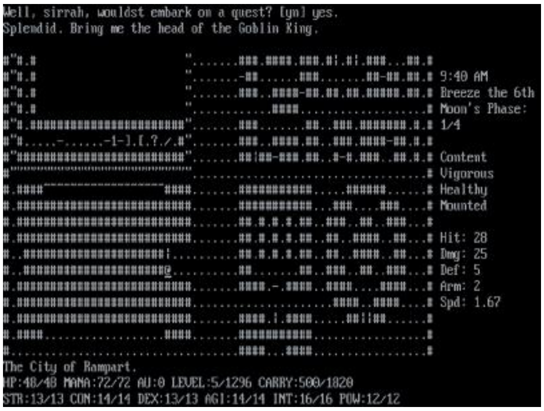


```
welcome
  to
omega
```

Laurence R. Brothers, 1988
MS-DOS, Amiga, Linux and Windows

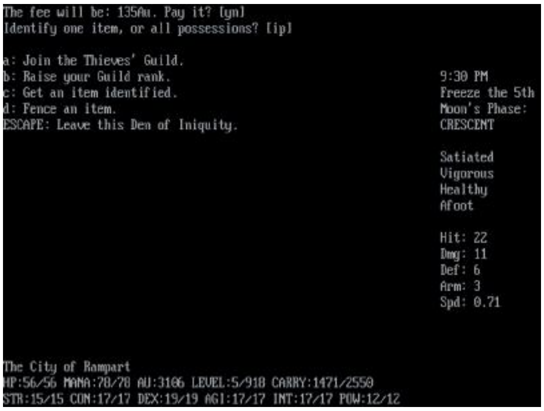
Omega is an obscure game in the niche Roguelike community. Other Roguelikes from its era were simple affairs; get to the bottom of the dungeon and recover an artefact or kill a final boss, and then crawl your way back to the surface. Some of the nuts and bolts were slightly different, but for the most part the games of this genre played similarly to one another. *Omega* flipped a lot of *Rogue*'s tropes on their heads and succeeded in going in new and interesting directions.

In 1989, Origin Systems released a different game called *Omega*, about designing tanks. These two are unrelated.



```
Well, sirrah, wouldst embark on a quest? [yn] yes.
Splendid. Bring me the head of the Goblin King.

9:40 AM
Breeze the 6th
Moon's Phase:
1/4

Content
Vigorous
Healthy
Mounted

Hit: 28
Dmg: 25
Def: 5
Arm: 2
Spd: 1.67

The City of Rampart.
HP:48/48 MANA:72/72 AU:0 LEVEL:5/1296 CARRY:500/1820
STR:13/13 CON:14/14 DEX:13/13 AGI:14/14 INT:16/16 POW:12/12
```

While randomly-generated dungeons are still a big part of the game, *Omega* has the city of Rampart as a fixed hub, with several outlying towns, castles and dungeons, adding NPCs, quests and a lot of lore to the Roguelike genre



```
The fee will be: 135Au. Pay it? [yn]
Identify one item, or all possessions? [ip]

a: Join the Thieves' Guild.
b: Raise your Guild rank.                                9:30 PM
c: Get an item identified.                               Freeze the 5th
d: Fence an item.                                        Moon's Phase:
ESCAPE: Leave this Den of Iniquity.                      CRESCENT

                                                         Satiated
                                                         Vigorous
                                                         Healthy
                                                         Afoot

                                                         Hit: 22
                                                         Dmg: 11
                                                         Def: 6
                                                         Arm: 3
                                                         Spd: 0.71

The City of Rampart
HP:56/56 MANA:78/78 AU:3106 LEVEL:5/918 CARRY:1471/2550
STR:15/15 CON:17/17 DEX:19/19 AGI:17/17 INT:17/17 POW:12/12
```

Joining a guild is like choosing a character class, but you can join more than one at a time; they offer many benefits, like the Thieves' Guild identifying your items, but can also expel you if you break their rules

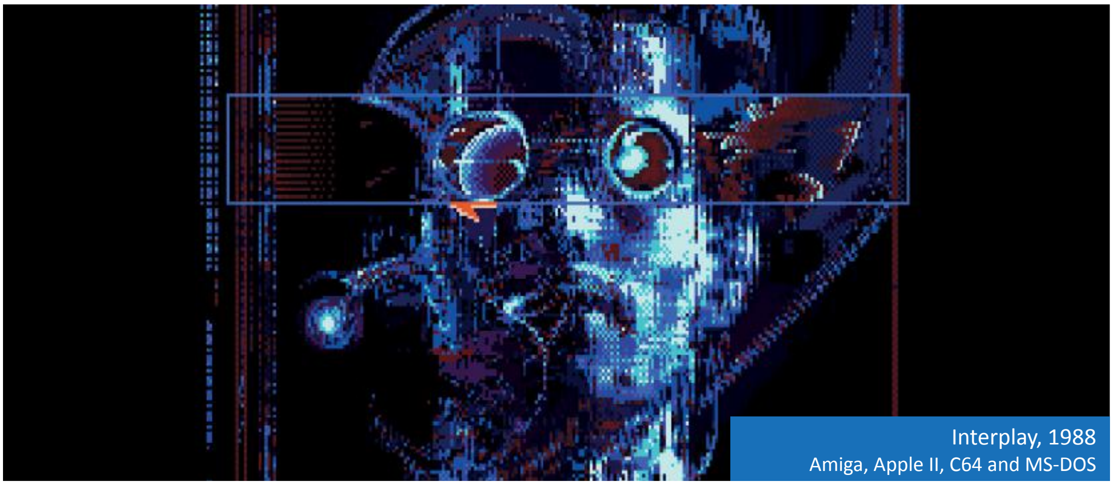
Instead of rolling for your character's ability scores, *Omega* had an option for creating a character based upon how you reported yourself in a questionnaire. During character generation, instead of choosing your class, you could instead join a guild. Instead of one game ending, *Omega* allowed a player to earn a victory in several different ways, such as by working your way up guild ranks or by earning enough money to retire.

Many of these features would influence future games. There is a chaos aspect of the game whereby you can encounter a mutating effect that might either kill you or level you up. This chaos magic effect would become an important part of the gameplay in the better-known *ADOM* (1994). Games such as *TOME* (2012) would take the idea of guilds and multiple endings and extend that to a player's quest-line, based upon their character creation. *Omega* presaged a lot of great ideas in later Roguelikes, but in itself never reached the heights and popularity of its future cousins.

The desire to create something quite different from *Rogue* would undermine *Omega*'s chance of becoming more popular. Instead of just overhauling character creation and the main quest, *Omega*'s developers also reworked the entire combat system and user interface. Games such as *Moria* and *Hack* did a lot of things differently from *Rogue*, but a fan of *Rogue* could still easily learn their way around those games.

Omega was so different that even an experienced *Rogue* player had to start from scratch. Combat was convoluted, with different options for high, low or middle attacks. Just changing equipment required several additional key presses, deliberately keeping players from easily employing inventory-held devices. All this made the early versions of *Omega* a chore to play: a damn shame, because there were so many good ideas hiding behind the horrible interface. **DT**

Neuromancer



Interplay, 1988
Amiga, Apple II, C64 and MS-DOS

Cyberpunk is one of those genres I wished had gotten as much play in CRPGs as it did on tabletops. For their part, Interplay went straight to the source with William Gibson's *Neuromancer*. The result was a sort of cross between a traditional 2D adventure and a CRPG, a year before Sierra's *Quest for Glory* hit retail.

The game doesn't follow the events of the book, but uses the same setting and some of the characters. In the year 2058, people plug into the net in a literal sense, thanks to surgically implanted jacks in their heads transforming all those 0s and 1s into digital hallucinations. And someone or something in there is making all of your friends disappear, one by one.

As a cyberspace 'cowboy' who only has six credits to his name and who spent last night face down in food he hasn't paid for yet, you'll be pulled into the same mystery – interrogating NPCs for leads and finding ways into places you're not wanted, then eventually hitting the matrix in search of data and the credits for upgrades and connection time.

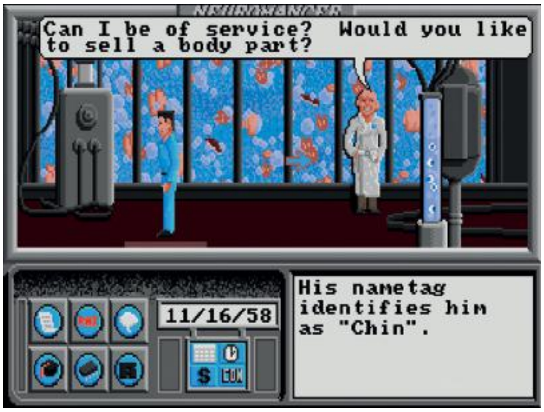
Skills are learned via chips that can be bought and upgraded the same way software and your cyberdeck can be. Spells are software. Those are used in combat within cyberspace against intrusion countermeasure electronics (ICE) and the occasional AI watchdog, protecting fortresses of corporate secrets.

One can also sell organs, replacing them with cheap plastic, though don't expect what's left of your meat body to survive more than a minor biofeedback shock in cyberspace. While conceptually interesting, these interactions are where the tone difference stands out. While *Neuromancer* was a dark, frightening novel, the game takes a tongue-in-cheek approach. No event is more emblematic of this than meeting a sect of *Pong* worshipers. Yes, the videogame.

As unique as Interplay's vision was, others had even higher aims. Timothy Leary, the LSD-advocating psychologist, was the book's licence owner and pitched a different game – a CYOA "Mind Movie" in which you played as celebrities and saw cyberspace as fractals.

No matter the interpretation, *Neuromancer's* cyberpunk manifesto continues to influence dystopian futures where flesh is cheap and information can flash-fry the wetware between your ears. **RE**

***Neuromancer's* box mentioned it would soon be "a major motion picture from Cabana Boy Productions", but no movie adaptation ever came out.**

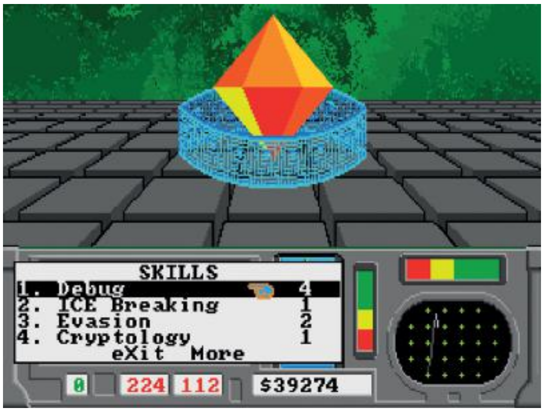


```
Can I be of service? Would you like
to sell a body part?
```

```
11/16/58
```

```
His nametag
identifies him
as "Chin".
```

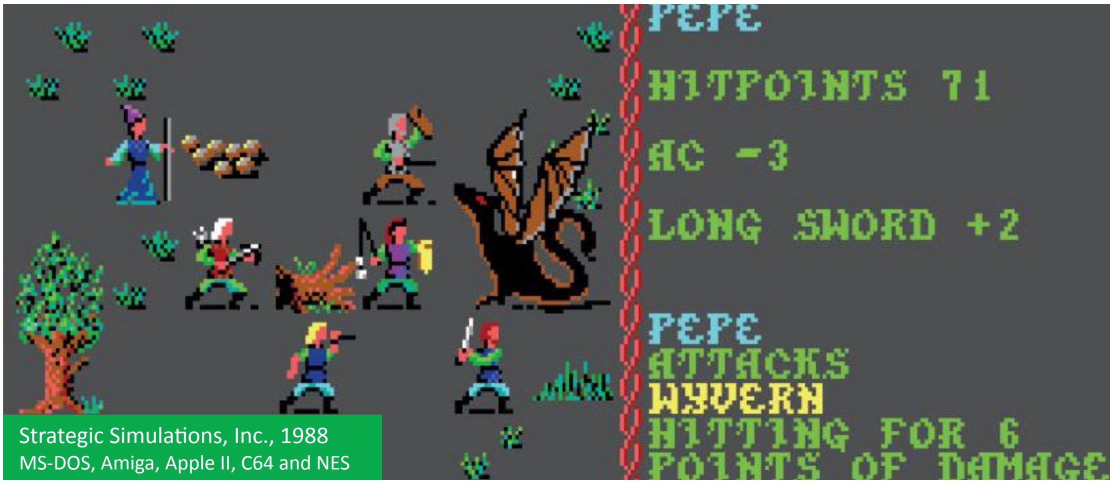
A big part of the game is spent trying to get money to survive, in any way possible



```
SKILLS
1. Debug            4
2. ICE Breaking     1
3. Evasion          2
4. Cryptology       1
   eXit   More
0  224  112  $39274
```

Surfing through cyberspace, you'll use 'warez' to infiltrate databases

Pool of Radiance



```
PEPE
HITPOINTS 71
AC -3
LONG SWORD +2

PEPE
ATTACKS
WYVERN
HITTING FOR 6
POINTS OF DAMAGE
```

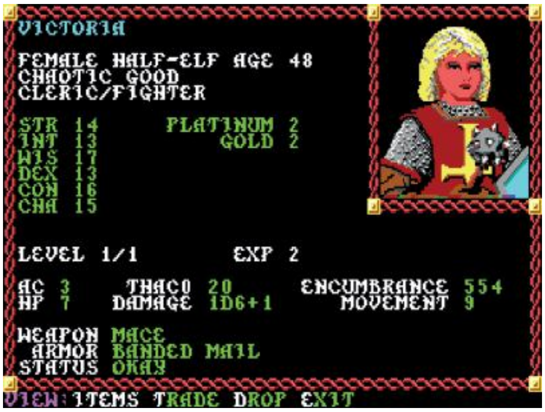
Strategic Simulations, Inc., 1988
MS-DOS, Amiga, Apple II, C64 and NES

Pool of Radiance would be the first in a series of four computer role-playing games set in the *Forgotten Realms* Moonsea region. It would also launch the acclaimed and influential "Gold Box" titles developed by SSI – so called due to the iconic golden boxes they were packaged in.

In 1987, after two console games for the Intellivision, TSR announced they would like to license *D&D* to a computer game company. Origin, EA and SSI were the final bidders. SSI won with a broad plan of various games across multiple genres.

The first officially licensed *Dungeons & Dragons* computer game, it faithfully adapted the extremely popular *AD&D* pen-and-paper rules to the virtual environment for the first time, paving the way for many games to follow. A remarkable feat at the time, the game packs a meticulous implementation of the expansive ruleset, from its spell book and combat mechanics to a statistically accurate bestiary. Even the monster portraits can be traced to *AD&D*'s 1st Edition *Monster Manual,* recreated in pixel form. Other iconic mechanics adhered to include resting, and the time needed to heal or to memorise spells.

From the very start, *Pool of Radiance* provides the basics of the role-playing genre, requiring players to create a party of up to six characters, built from *AD&D's* multiple race and class combinations.



```
VICTORIA
FEMALE HALF-ELF AGE 48
CHAOTIC GOOD
CLERIC/FIGHTER

STR 14        PLATINUM 2
INT 13            GOLD 2
WIS 17
DEX 13
CON 16
CHA 15

LEVEL 1/1          EXP 2

AC 3      THAC0 20     ENCUMBRANCE 554
HP 7     DAMAGE 1D6+1     MOVEMENT 9

WEAPON MACE
 ARMOR BANDED MAIL
STATUS OKAY
VIEW:ITEMS TRADE DROP EXIT
```

You can create a party of up to six characters, customising their portraits and combat icons, then play them all the way to *Pools of Darkness*, reaching epic levels of power

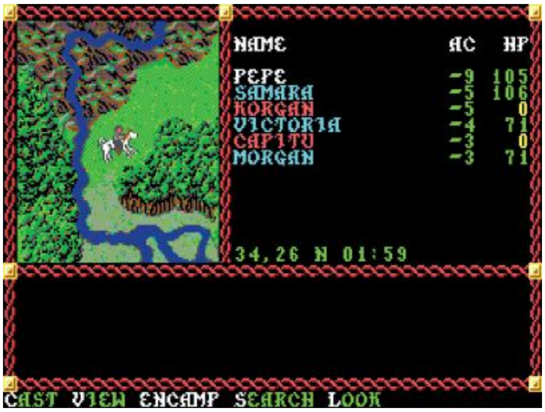
The heroes would then begin at the port city of Phlan, motivated by fortune or glory to win back the city from its monstrous overlord. A novel feature in *Pool of Radiance* is a mission-based adventure, with characters receiving assignments from the Council, or taking up tasks that are completely optional. The open nature of its structure allows players to go about quests in any order, and most objectives can be accomplished in multiple ways.

Exploration is done in first-person view; with a 3D-view port window into the fantastic world – as in the *Bard's Tale* series. The interface is clunky and slow, but individual character sheets display all the vital information one would expect from the tabletop game. Players must learn to track hit points, THAC0, armour class, inventories and spell books, contributing to the pervasive feel of pen and paper.

When diplomacy fails and a battle begins, the player is switched to a top-down "isometric" view of a field, derived from *Wizard's Crown*. The characters are represented by icons (you can even customise yours), and movement and positioning are crucial. Staged against foes in tactical turn-based resolution, the battles can be impressively large-scale, sometimes with dozens of enemies at once.

Also featured is the overland map. Upon leaving the city or one of the many dungeons in the outskirts, the party representation changes to a single icon in order to traverse the open land. This includes the possibility of random encounters and discovery of new locations or other hidden secrets.

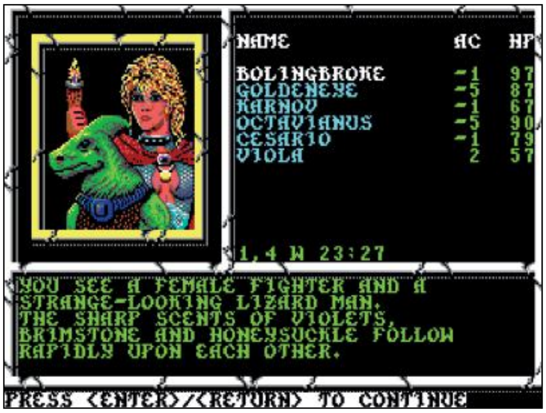
After finishing *Pool of Radiance*, players may transfer their heroes to the next game in the series, all the way up to the fourth game. Characters can progress in a single, sweeping campaign, as in ongoing play with pen and paper, reaching epic power levels.



NAME	AC	HP
PEPE	-9	105
SAMARA	-5	106
KORGAN	-5	0
VICTORIA	-4	71
CAPITU	-3	0
MORGAN	-3	71

34,26 N 01:59

Pool of Radiance features a vast city and its surrounding wilderness, packed with many missions and side-quests



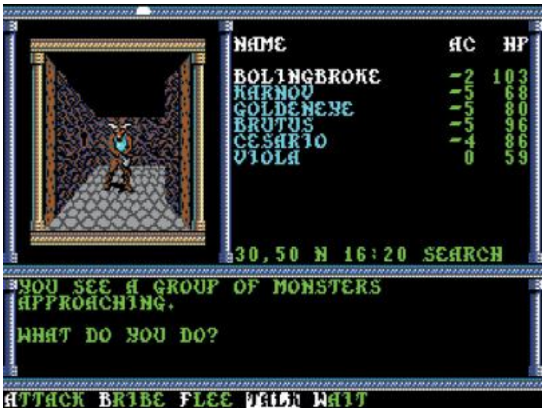
NAME	AC	HP
BOLINGBROKE	-1	97
GOLDENEYE	-5	87
KARNOV	-1	67
OCTAVIANUS	-5	90
CESARIO	-1	79
VIOLA	2	57

1,4 N 23:27

YOU SEE A FEMALE FIGHTER AND A STRANGE-LOOKING LIZARD MAN. THE SHARP SCENTS OF VIOLETS, BRIMSTONE AND HONEYSUCKLE FOLLOW RAPIDLY UPON EACH OTHER.

PRESS <ENTER>/<RETURN> TO CONTINUE

Curse of Azure Bonds introduced many improvements and a story set after the events of the *Azure Bonds* novel



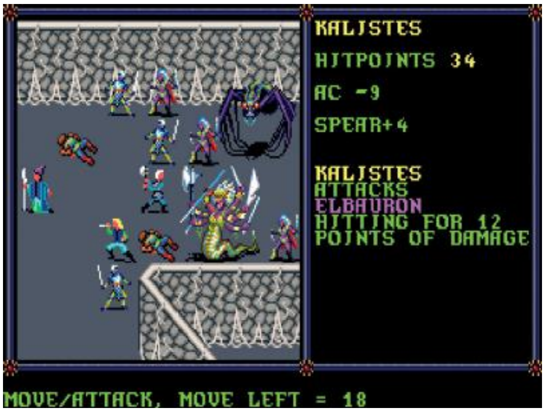
NAME	AC	HP
BOLINGBROKE	-2	103
KARNOV	-5	68
GOLDENEYE	-5	80
BRUTUS	-5	96
CESARIO	-4	86
VIOLA	0	59

30,50 N 16:20 SEARCH

YOU SEE A GROUP OF MONSTERS APPROACHING.

WHAT DO YOU DO?

Secret of the Silver Blade had huge areas, far bigger than the standard 16 × 16 maps, filled with enemies to battle



KALISTES
HITPOINTS 34
AC -9
SPEAR+4

KALISTES ATTACKS ELBAURON HITTING FOR 12 POINTS OF DAMAGE

MOVE/ATTACK, MOVE LEFT = 18

Pools of Darkness made the jump to VGA graphics and delivered a high-level adventure across dimensions

The sequel, *Curse of the Azure Bonds* (1989), was a more story-focused adventure, the party awakening to find their equipment stolen (a cheap balance trick) and their arms branded with mystic blue sigils, which rob them of their free will. The characters then follow the footsteps of Alias and Finder Wyvernspur, as chronicled in the TSR-published novel *Azure Bonds*.

The game expanded upon the Gold Box engine, introducing the Paladin and Ranger classes and adding a "fix" command to facilitate the healing process in the camp menu. The overland map now includes small utility towns, which offer temple, tavern and shop services from a menu. Also included are mini-dungeons for the party to explore, as bonus content loosely tied to the main storyline.

The third title of the saga, *Secret of the Silver Blades* (1990), sends the party to an entirely different region, the mining town of New Verdigris – although events still tie in to a wider tapestry being woven. Gone was the overland map portion of the adventure, replaced by confinement around the mysterious Well of Knowledge, using teleporters to access areas.

Unfortunately, *Secret of the Silver Blade* might be considered not only the weakest of the series, but perhaps of all the Gold Box games. Its plot is simple and linear, with few role-playing opportunities and far too many random encounters, which can get tiresome.

Finally, in 1991, SSI released the culminating title *Pools of Darkness*, delivering an epic conclusion in the truest sense of the word. The characters could level up to the dizzy heights approaching forty, and be thrown against the pawns of a vengeful god.

The overland map was back – but multiplied – taking the party to different dimensions. Supremely memorable is the section taking place in the spider realm of the Marilith Kalistes, which should strike a chord with any *AD&D* fan who played the *Queen of the Demon Web Pits* module. And there was still a high-level post-game dungeon, designed by Dave Shelley.

A massive commercial and critical success, the *Pool of Radiance* games were remarkable not only for bringing an authentic *Dungeons &Dragons* experience to computers, but also for allowing players to forge a heroic story across four expertly crafted titles. **DO**

***The Gold Box Companion* is a free fan-made tool that can be used to enhance the Gold Box games, offering features such as automap, info HUDs and cheats.**

Star Saga: One

Beyond the Boundary

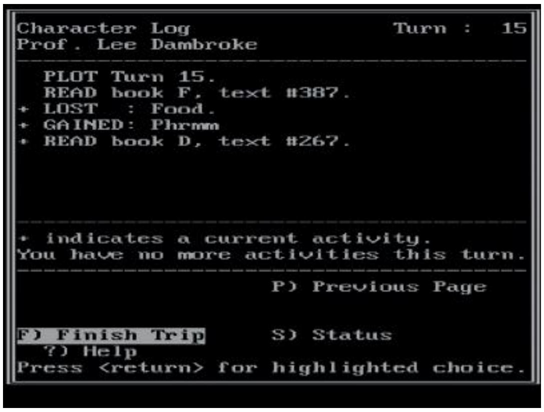
PROFESSOR
LEE DAMBROKE
DEAN OF
XENOBIOLOGY

Masterplay Publishing, 1988
MS-DOS and Apple IIGS

The very first computer RPGs, created way back in the '70s, were born out of a simple realisation: tabletop RPGs are full of rules, numbers and percentages, and a computer is much better at keeping track of those than a human being. *Star Saga: One*, by Andrew Greenberg – one of the *Wizardry* creators – is that idea taken one step further.

In the early 2000s a group of fans from the Home of the Underdogs created the *Star Saga Game Kit*, which contains an interactive map and all of *Star Saga*'s text in HTML form.

Star Saga's box was huge, with a large sector map, player tokens, game disks and 20 printed booklets that added up to over 700 pages



```
Character Log                              Turn  :   15
Prof. Lee Dambroke
--------------------------------------------------------
  PLOT Turn 15.
  READ book F, text #387.
+ LOST   : Food.
+ GAINED: Phrmm
+ READ book D, text #267.




+ indicates a current activity.
You have no more activities this turn.
--------------------------------------------------------
                   P) Previous Page

F) Finish Trip     S) Status
  ?) Help
Press <return> for highlighted choice.
```

The software has no graphics whatsoever; after you input your actions, it calculates the outcome and directs you to one of the 888 texts in the booklets

The game can be described as a mix of CRPG, boardgame and Choose Your Own Adventure book. It's a space opera to be played by 1–6 players on a large map, with all the rules being handled by the computer – a reliable and always-available Game Master.

You start by selecting one of six pre-made characters, each with their own illustrated booklet that richly describes their background, starting resources and secret motivations – such as finding an item and taking it back home. You then open the sector map and choose a planet to visit in search of your goals.

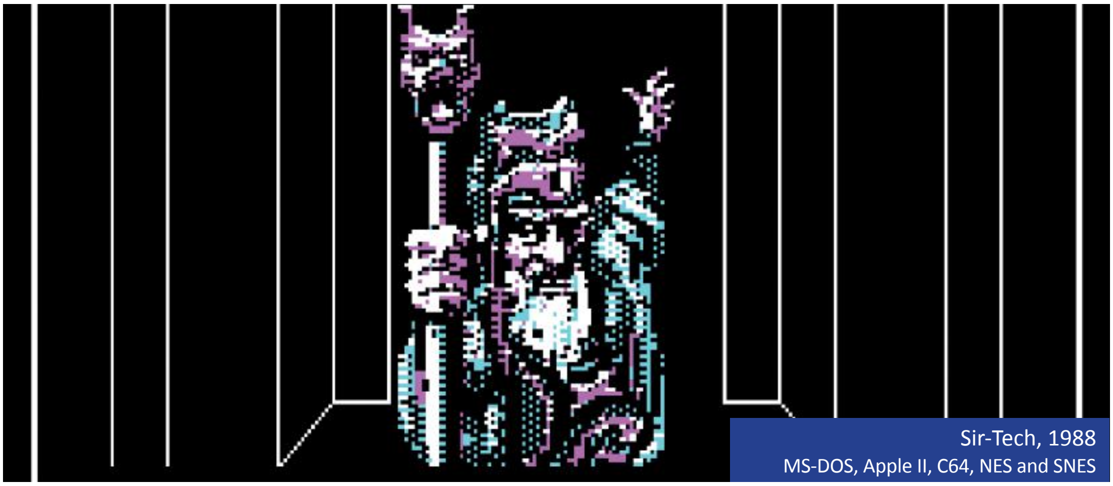
Each turn, the player inputs their action into the computer, which will reply with a reference to text to be read in the printed booklets, showing the outcome of their choice and the options now available. A single turn has several phases, allowing for multiple actions, such as talking to NPCs or trading fuel and resources. The computer will keep track of all these, as well as handling *Star Saga's* simple, item-based combat.

It's a clever concept. Thanks to the computer, the game has a depth that no CYOA book can match, while the printed booklets allow for funny, well-written text that was miles ahead of that in any CRPG of the time, making every new planet and encounter feel unique. Sadly, the technology wasn't there yet. The back-and-forth between PC, booklets and map is slow and awkward, and completing your objectives takes far too long – one playthrough can last weeks, or even months!

The game still had a sequel, *Star Saga: Two - The Clathran Menace* (1989), which continued the story of the six main characters. In fact, the series was planned as a trilogy, but poor sales ended it prematurely.

From today's perspective, it's almost absurd: all these booklets, maps and inputs could easily be handled by a single phone app. A bold game, *Star Saga*'s biggest flaw was to be way ahead of its time. **FE**

Wizardry V:
Heart of the Maelstrom



Sir-Tech, 1988
MS-DOS, Apple II, C64, NES and SNES

Around the time the first *Wizardry* game was released, an enthusiastic programmer known as David W. Bradley started working on an ambitious RPG called *Dragon's Breath*. In 1984 he sent the game to Sir-Tech, which agreed to publish it on one condition: it was remade as the fifth *Wizardry*.

Wizardry IV, however, got stuck in development hell and would only be completed at the end of 1987, forcing Bradley's game to be postponed for years.

This tortuous story explains why *Heart of the Maelstrom* is so similar to the original *Wizardry* on the surface, despite being released seven years later.

Yet all that time wasn't wasted idling. *Maelstrom* is an iterative title that meticulously improves the most lacklustre aspects of previous games. The Thief, for instance, used to be a pretty useless class; now he's required to pick locked doors and search for secrets, can sneak around in combat to launch surprise attacks and is able to use a bow to fight from the back row.

Other additions include polearms with extended range, the ability to swim and friendly NPCs that roam the dungeons. There are also new spells, including creature summoning, magical barriers and monster charming, all of which add new tactical elements.

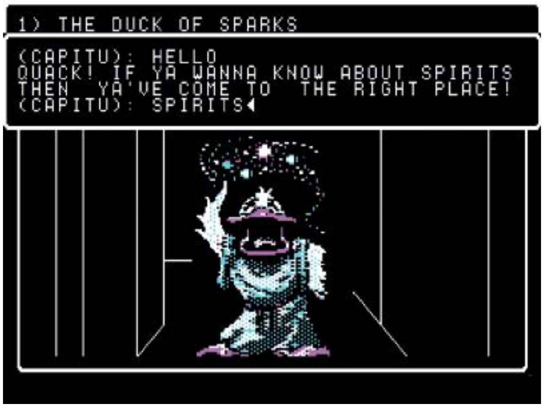
While these gameplay improvements make the game much better, what stands out in *Wizardry V* is D.W. Bradley's writing and design. Humour is ever-present, making each dialogue or description feel like a reward to the player. The game allows players to interact with memorable NPCs like the annoying Pot of Gold, the pitiful Mad Stomper, the Duck of Sparks or the drunk sorcerer, and many of these characters can be bribed, pickpocketed or even attacked.

The dungeon also gained personality. With a few sentences, Bradley turns wire-frame walls into dens of thieves, shady taverns or even disco ballrooms.

Their very shape comes into play; in previous games they were limited to a 20 × 20 grid, but now huge levels stretch in unpredictable shapes, challenging the map-making skills of any player.

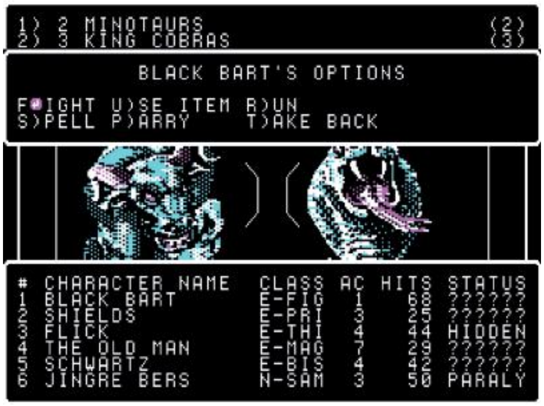
Heart of the Maelstrom is, for me, the last *Wizardry* game with a child's heart. The following titles grew increasingly more advanced and became objectively "better" RPGs, yet I always felt something intangible was left behind with the series' "coming of age". **DB**

As with *Wizardry I–III*, nowadays we suggest playing the SNES remake of *Heart of the Maelstrom*, due to its superior graphics and interface.



```
1) THE DUCK OF SPARKS
(CAPITU): HELLO
QUACK! IF YA WANNA KNOW ABOUT SPIRITS
THEN  YA'VE COME TO  THE RIGHT PLACE!
(CAPITU): SPIRITS◂
```

The friendly NPCs that roam the dungeons are one of the big additions to *Wizardry V*; they are vital to solving the game's many puzzles



```
1) 2 MINOTAURS                       (2)
2) 3 KING COBRAS                     (3)
          BLACK BART'S OPTIONS

F●IGHT U)SE ITEM R)UN
S)PELL P)ARRY    T)AKE BACK

# CHARACTER NAME  CLASS AC HITS STATUS
1 BLACK BART      E-FIG  1   68 ??????
2 SHIELDS         E-PRI  3   25 ??????
3 FLICK           E-THI  4   44 HIDDEN
4 THE OLD MAN     E-MAG  7   29 ??????
5 SCHWARTZ        E-BIS  4   42 ??????
6 JINGRE BERS     N-SAM  3   50 PARALY
```

Wizardry V's artist was clearly skilled, but the game's CGA graphics were terribly outdated next to those in games like *Dungeon Master* and *Might and Magic II*

Ultima V:
Warriors of Destiny

Origin Systems, 1988
MS-DOS, Amiga, Apple II, Atari ST, NES, etc.

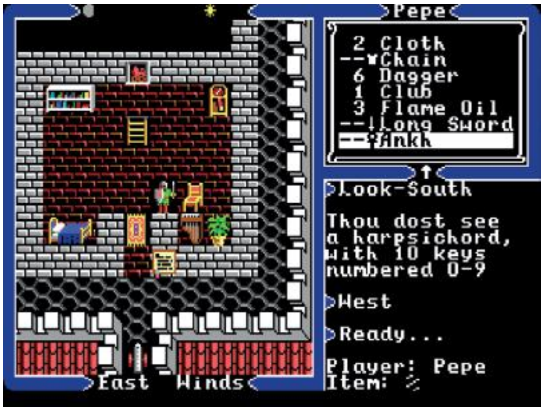
***Ultima V* carried on the proud tradition from *U4* of including a physical trinket in the box that was key to the plot: in this case, the Codex coin.**

The entire *Ultima* series is near and dear to my heart, but none more than *Ultima V* – a game I spent over five years of my life striving to recreate via a *Dungeon Siege* mod called *Lazarus*.

What makes *Ultima V* so special? While the first three *Ultima* games established foundational design tenets for CRPGs in general, and *Ultima IV* pioneered the concept of morality in games, *Ultima V* was the first RPG to introduce true world simulation.

By "world simulation" I mean the collection of systems which grant players the illusion of a living, breathing world that exists independently of their actions, rather than simply a game board upon which the player can stab monsters.

Earlier *Ultima* games had already introduced primitive day-night cycles in which visibility and monster-spawning varied based on the time of day, but *Ultima V* took that a step further and introduced NPC scheduling – merchants get out of bed in the morning and walk to their shops to open for business, while guards close down city gates after nightfall to keep out wandering monsters.



```
Look-South

Thou dost see
a harpsichord,
with 10 keys
numbered 0-9

West

Ready...

Player: Pepe
Item:
```

From chairs you could sit in to torches you could steal and barrels you could move, *Ultima V* created a living world

On top of that, environmental objects were actually recognised by the game for the first time – each potted plant or bookshelf wasn't just a painted bit of the background, but a physical thing you could move around. Harpsichords could actually be played, and a careful look through the game's manual could teach the player how to play a specific tune with special effects in the game world. While this sometimes allowed for puzzle-solving, it mostly just served to make the game world feel more real and to give players more opportunities for interaction.

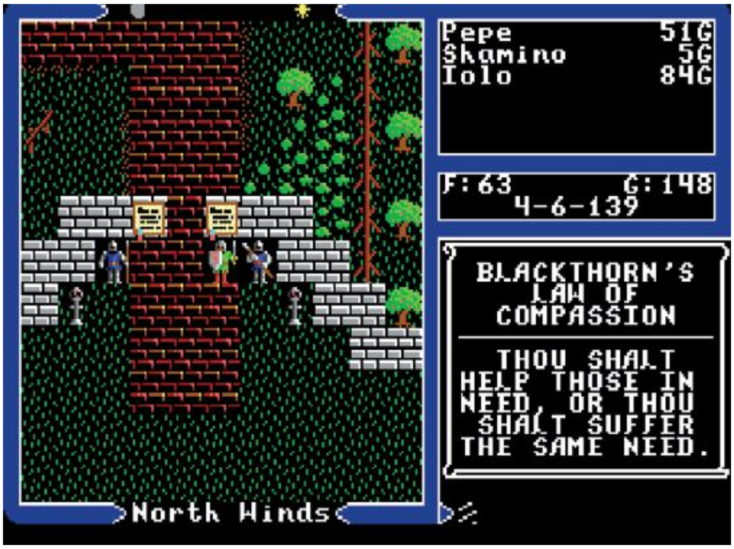
And that was the beauty of it – *Ultima V* was perhaps the first time a game designer realised he could generate a tremendous amount of fun by simply creating an immersive world with some limited agency and letting players run wild. The groundwork laid with this philosophy would later emerge (with improvements) in everything from *Grand Theft Auto* to *Skyrim*.

On top of its accomplishments in world design, *Ultima V* pushed forward on the narrative front, turning *Ultima IV*'s focus on virtue upside-down as Lord Blackthorn – the primary antagonist of the game – codifies the eight virtues of *Ultima IV* into draconian laws. To some characters you meet, Lord Blackthorn is a vile usurper and his laws are unjust, while others are benefiting from his rule and see the player character and his friends as dangerous outlaws.

You play a Robin Hood-esque role, never entirely certain who you can trust and who might turn you in to the authorities. This situation leads to interesting questions like, "Does virtue still have meaning when compelled?" and introduces shades of grey to the moral equation of *Ultima*, creating situations where what's "right" isn't always readily apparent and keeping players on their toes.

"Where *Ultima IV* was fairly black-and-white – I mean good guys are good guys and bad guys are bad guys – *Ultima V* unfolds in a grey area. Lots of characters try convincing you that Blackthorn is doing things just right; some say he's an evil force; and others realise he's wrong but are taking advantage of the situation for personal profit and are willing to fight anyone who opposes Blackthorn."

– Richard Garriott,
Ultima V*'s creator*



Pepe	51G
Shamino	5G
Iolo	84G

F:63 G:148
4-6-139

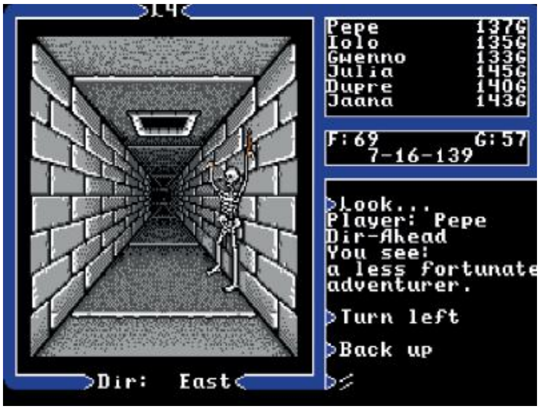
BLACKTHORN'S LAW OF COMPASSION

THOU SHALT HELP THOSE IN NEED, OR THOU SHALT SUFFER THE SAME NEED.

With Lord British now missing, Blackthorn has taken control and imposed a darker, extremist version of the virtues

Another place *Ultima V* worked wonders was in the Underworld – a massive new region added to the game world for the first time in the series. The Underworld was a sprawling cavernous region every bit as big (and as open) as the surface world, linked to the realm above by a network of dungeons. The impetus for the game's story is the disappearance of the rightful king (Lord British) into this shadowy expanse, and the developers of *Ultima V* used this fact as an opportunity for immersion by providing a written chronicle of the king's expedition into the darkness.

Smart players could read carefully through the chronicle and use its words to guide them in-game as they followed the lost king's footsteps. The ensuing connection between the shared experience of the real player and that of the character they controlled was remarkably powerful.



Pepe	137G
Iolo	135G
Gwenno	133G
Julia	145G
Dupre	140G
Jaana	143G

F:69 G:57
7-16-139

>Look...
Player: Pepe
Dir-Ahead
You see:
a less fortunate adventurer.
>Turn left
>Back up

Ultima V would be the last game of the core series to use a first-person "blobber" view when inside dungeons

In conclusion, from its morally ambiguous dilemmas and intriguing story premise to its primitive world simulation and vast play space, *Ultima V* paved the way for all the great RPGs to come.

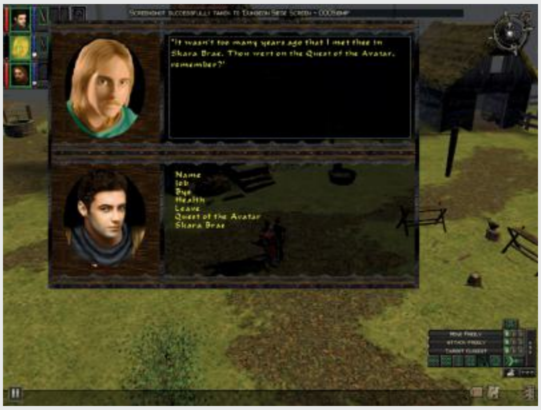
If you haven't already played it, you owe it to yourself to pick up a copy and experience this key piece of RPG history! **IF**

Mods:

Ultima V Update Patch: If you're playing the MS-DOS version of *U5*, use this mod to add the full soundtrack found only in other versions of the game.

Ultima V: Lazarus: a 60+ hour *Dungeon Siege* mod that recreates *Ultima V* from the ground up, with modern 3D graphics, CD-quality music, real-time combat, richer quests and dialogues, and an optional "evil" path through the game.

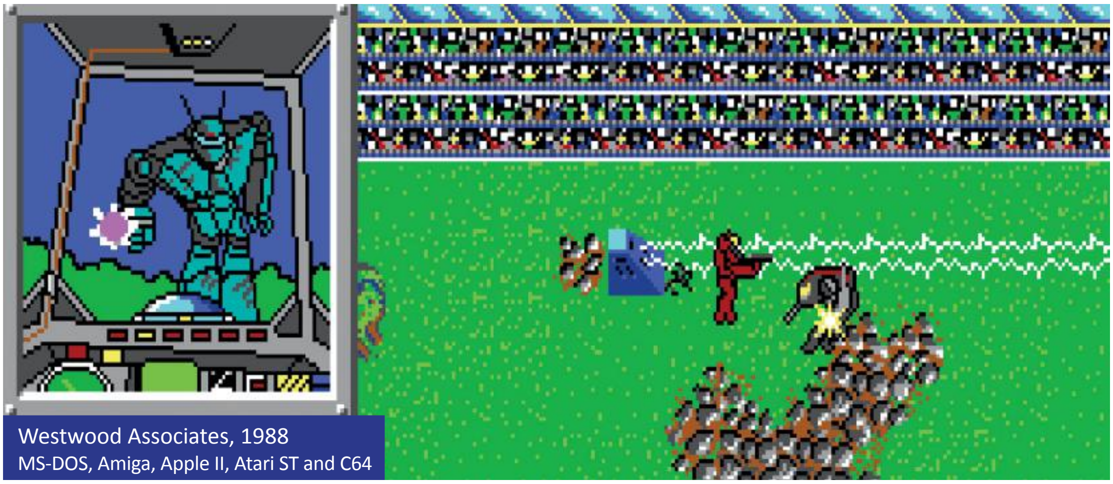
You can find it here: www.u5lazarus.com



"It wasn't too many years ago that I met thee in Skara Brae. Thou went on the Quest of the Avatar, remember?"

Ultima V: Lazarus uses the *Dungeon Siege* engine *to* recreate *Ultima V* with more modern technology

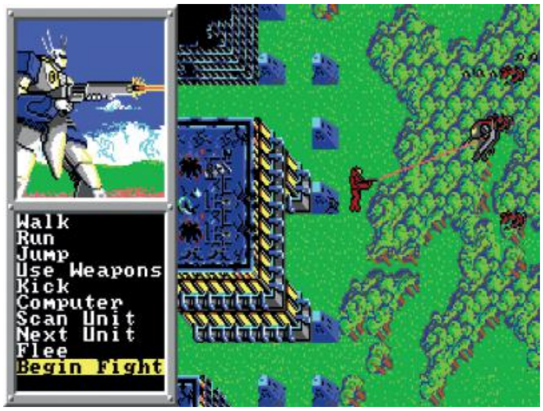
BattleTech:
The Crescent Hawk's Inception



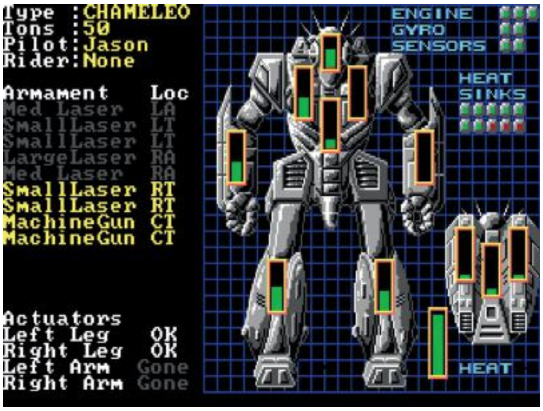
Westwood Associates, 1988
MS-DOS, Amiga, Apple II, Atari ST and C64

***BattleTech* is a tabletop wargame series created in 1984. It gave rise to several novels, miniatures and spin-off games, including the *MechWarrior* tabletop RPG and videogames.**

B*attleTech: The Crescent Hawk's Inception* was the first officially licensed *BattleTech* video game, distributed at the height of the tabletop games' popularity. Despite being the first CRPG developed by then-fledgling company Westwood Studios, it was a welcome emulation of the fictional setting and tabletop experience. You play Jason Youngblood, a young and ambitious noble whose family is closely connected to one of the five great houses of the *BattleTech* setting.



Mech battles are the game's main attraction, but you can also walk around on foot, exploring cities and fighting other humans using guns and vibroblades



Type :CHAMELEO
Tons :50
Pilot:Jason
Rider:None

Armament	Loc
Med Laser	LA
SmallLaser	LT
SmallLaser	LT
LargeLaser	RA
Med Laser	RA
SmallLaser	RT
SmallLaser	RT
MachineGun	CT
MachineGun	CT

Actuators	
Left Leg	OK
Right Leg	OK
Left Arm	Gone
Right Arm	Gone

There are only four playable mechs, but you can customize their loadout. Maintenance and upgrades are expensive, so there's an arena and a simple in-game stock market for players to earn money.

As your character progresses through a military academy for battlemech pilots, small hints of the larger political world are dropped as exposition. The constant fear of unending war leads to a nightmare about forces from a rival House invading the planet; there's the jibes of maintenance men to mech pilots; Jason gets accosted in a lounge by a member of a lower caste who is disgruntled about pampered nobility. These brief moments hint at the greater universe that is out there.

The turn-based gameplay holds up surprisingly well by today's standards, with the player able to select movement and firing options from easily navigable menus. Just as in the tabletop game, successful weapon hits can strike a battlemech along various parts of the torso or a limb, gradually ripping away the external armour until damage begins to be inflicted on the critical internal structure and components, when weapons and even limbs start getting blown off.

This makes positioning important, as you attempt to manoeuvre around your opponent and keep the more damaged sides of your battlemech away from enemy weapons. Also adding to the complexity of the game are heat management, terrain effects, limited changes to weapon configurations, resource management for repairs and ammunition, and the ability to hire pilots to handle other battlemechs.

The framework of a great game is all here, but there isn't much actual content. *Crescent Hawk's* has only a limited number of light and medium battlemechs, and there are very few locations to visit. The developers were conscious of this issue, so they added tedious late-game puzzles and constant random encounters to pad out the length. It's a shame, too, because after this and its RTS-like sequel, *The Crescent Hawk's Revenge* (1990), *BattleTech* fans wouldn't enjoy a similar experience until the release of the far superior *MechCommander* (1998). **DT**

Dragon Wars

Interplay, 1989
Amiga, MS-DOS, C64, Apple II, NES, etc.

Dragon Wars was meant to have been titled *Bard's Tale IV*, but due to issues over the rights to the name, Interplay was forced to change its title months before release. Compared to its better-known predecessors, *DW* is a more complex RPG with meatier design – and yet it will be instantly familiar if you've played *Bard's Tale* – a tile-based game world divided between overworld, dungeons and cities.

You start the game dumped naked into a prison-city of slaves and have to figure out where and how to go from there with a party of four custom or pre-made characters. The story is well-written – mostly told by paragraphs in the manual – and the world is filled with optional places to explore and puzzles to figure out.

One thing that sets *DW* apart from most other games of its time is the freedom of choice in how you choose to accomplish some tasks and quests. An example: there are multiple ways to get out of the first city, depending on your use of skills such as climbing, sneaking, negotiation or the old-fashioned "just kill everything" approach. But your different choices can also have permanent consequences, an uncommon approach for the time. All these factors add colour and depth to the late-'80s CRPG experience and make you genuinely curious to see more of the game.

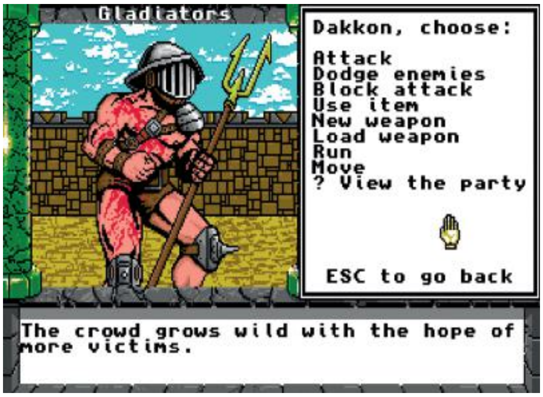
Other neat inclusions are the very nice auto-map feature and the custom macros. When properly set up, you can just press one button to have your entire party attack in a preconfigured way, or have a character use a skill on the current tile instead of going through a lot of menus and key-pressing. It's hard to overstate how handy this is in the quite repetitive combat.

The combat is turn-based, classic *Bard's Tale* fare, selecting the actions of each party member and then watching it play out. *DW* features frequent and tough combat in which you must strategize and pay attention.

The combat, puzzles and respectable size of the world mean this game demands your concentration and focus to complete. Without prior knowledge of how useful each attribute, skill, weapon or spell will be, and given the small margin of error due to limited skill points, be prepared for frustration and restarts.

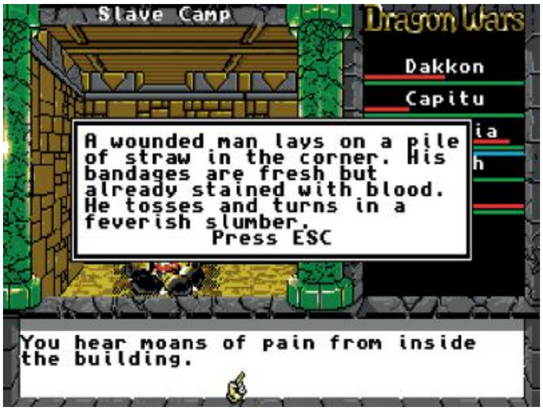
In my opinion, *Dragon Wars* stands as the best title among the "*Bard's Tale*-like" games of old, although it's not without its obstacles. **CH**

***Dragon Wars'* programmer Rebecca "Burger" Heineman did an interview with Matt Barton talking about the game and the story behind the title change.**



The crowd grows wild with the hope of more victims.

The game uses a point-buy character system, giving you very few points to split between stats and skills; thus, found gear and your ability to min/max your party at character-creation play a huge role

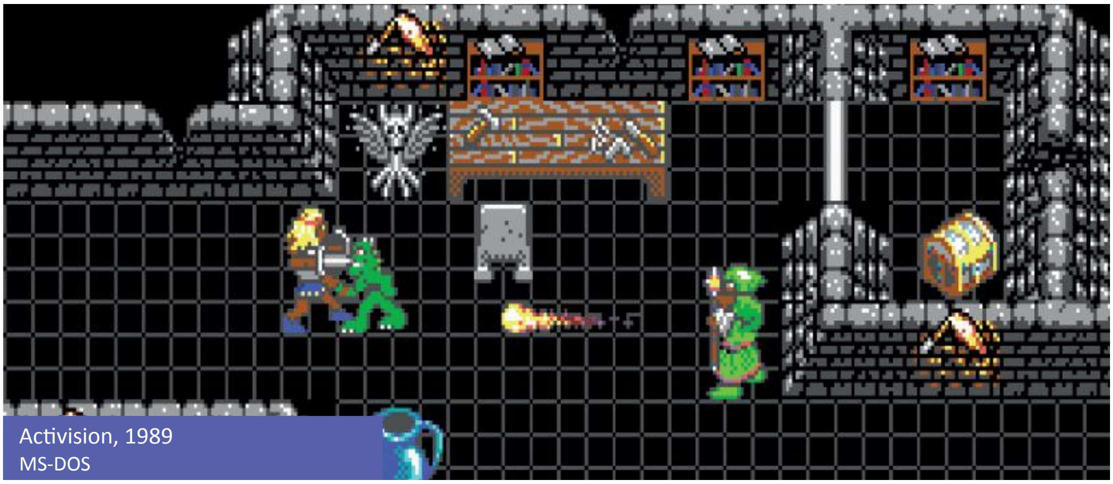


A wounded man lays on a pile of straw in the corner. His bandages are fresh but already stained with blood. He tosses and turns in a feverish slumber.
Press ESC

You hear moans of pain from inside the building.

The game adds many *Wasteland* influences to the formula, such as quests with multiple solutions and several skills you can use to interact with the world, like bandaging and lock-picking

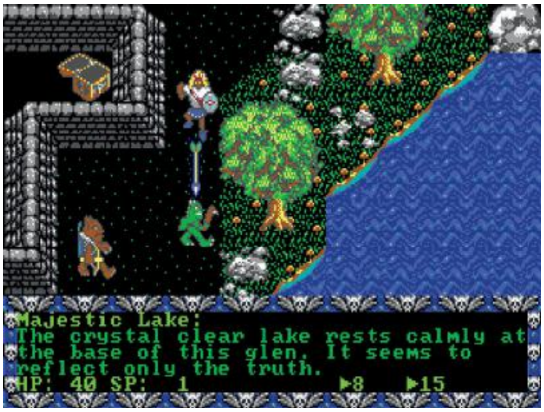
Prophecy I:
The Fall of Trinadon


Activision, 1989
MS-DOS

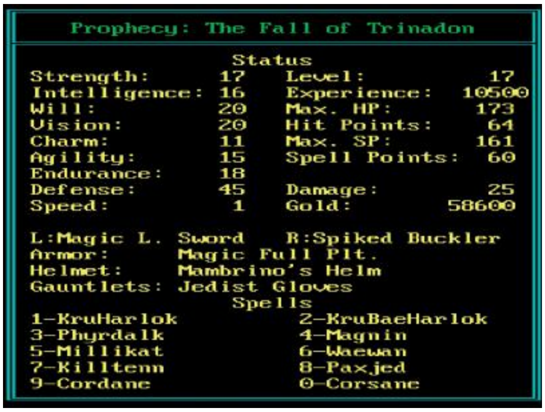
The game is called *Prophecy I* because creator Richard Seaborne originally planned to make it into a series. He couldn't get funding from Activison, so he moved on to make *Escape from Hell* (1990) for EA.

The late '80s is not what comes to mind when envisioning action RPGs, which may be why *Prophecy I: The Fall of Trinadon* never found much of an audience and is largely forgotten today.

Its VGA graphics were not particularly beautiful; it only used the PC's speaker for its sound effects and music; its interface was not terribly elegant. Yet *Prophecy* still packs a surprising amount of fun into an easy-to-play package.


```
Majestic Lake:
The crystal clear lake rests calmly at
the base of this glen. It seems to
reflect only the truth.
HP: 40 SP: 1          ▸8   ▸15
```

Each area screen is accompanied by brief but rather charming descriptive text, adding much to the overall sense of wonder


```
            Prophecy: The Fall of Trinadon

                      Status
Strength:      17    Level:             17
Intelligence:  16    Experience:     10500
Will:          20    Max. HP:          173
Vision:        20    Hit Points:        64
Charm:         11    Max. SP:          161
Agility:       15    Spell Points:      60
Endurance:     18
Defense:       45    Damage:            25
Speed:          1    Gold:           58600

L:Magic L. Sword     R:Spiked Buckler
Armor:     Magic Full Plt.
Helmet:    Mambrino's Helm
Gauntlets: Jedist Gloves
                      Spells
1-KruHarlok              2-KruBaeHarlok
3-Phyrdalk               4-Magnin
5-Millikat               6-Waewan
7-Killtenn               8-Paxjed
9-Cordane                0-Corsane
```

Spells can be modified by adding prefixes: "Harlok" heals 10 HP, while "KruHarlok" heals 30 HP but costs more to cast

The game starts in medias res, the protagonist having apparently slept through the massacre of his hometown. He rouses in time to begin his quest – to avenge his kin by finding and killing Lord Krellane.

As expected in a CRPG from this era, *Prophecy* features a full array of *Dungeons & Dragons*-descended statistics and generous expository text. But there are also plenty of unexpected elements, such as *Zelda*-like real-time combat in which hits and misses are driven entirely by player reflexes, while damage is calculated using the character's stats and equipment.

There is indeed a surprising array of equipment to find in the game, and though the multiple-body-part armour system has no impact on your character's appearance, the weapon and/or shield your character has equipped does appear. This is important, as a weapon's size directly correlates with its range.

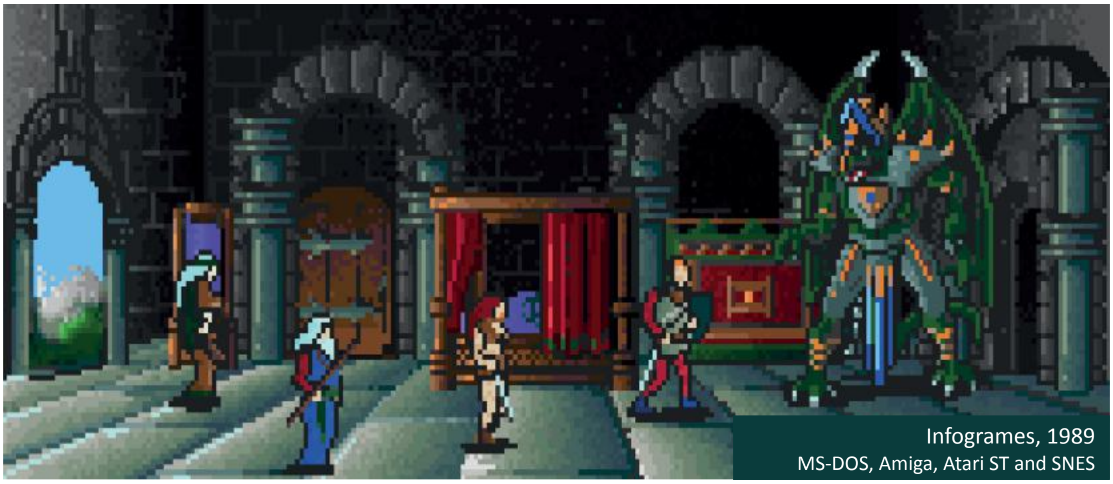
However, the game's most innovative and mechanically enjoyable feature is the ability to create spells through a rudimentary magical language. The manual presents you with a few dozen basic incantations, but spells can be further enhanced by adding prefixes to increase their strength and range, in exchange for increased energy costs.

It's difficult to envision a simpler system for allowing a basic set of spells to actually remain useful throughout the entire game.

There are of course anachronistic annoyances, including manual-based copy protection, randomly-generated-on-load treasure, mildly obtuse puzzles, processor-speed-based gameplay, and QuickBASIC-driven PC speaker sound/music (and fonts).

Regardless, no matter how long it has been since I first bought the game new, I still find it rewarding to return to *Prophecy* – which is high praise for an action RPG from the '80s. **QX**

Drakkhen


Infogrames, 1989
MS-DOS, Amiga, Atari ST and SNES

Drakkhen is a distinctly French RPG, starting from its story. A glory-seeking Paladin slew the Great Dragon – but it turns out that he was the keeper of magic, so now all the world's magic is gone, leaving humanity in chaos and unprotected.

You must create a party of four heroes (Warrior, Scout, Wizard and Priest) to explore a mystical island inhabited by eight warring dragon princes, collecting their treasures to resurrect the Great Dragon.

You explore the island through a free-roaming 3D first-person view. This was an amazing feat at the time and the island is huge, even if mostly empty. There are eight castles, a shop, a temple, and some inns, houses and teleporters, plus a nice day-night cycle.

Once you enter any castle, the game switches to a 2D side-view, whereby you can control each of your heroes individually, fighting monsters, collecting items and solving very simple puzzles.

Unfortunately, the combat is also very simple. Battles happen in real time and automatically – once you've ordered the party to attack all you can do is change the spells the Wizard and Priest are casting.

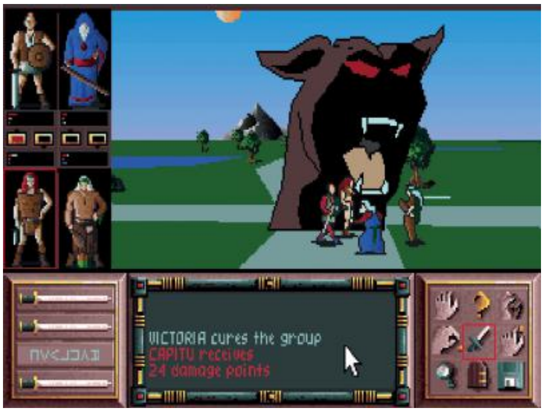
The difficulty is rather unfair, as the game is filled with traps that instantly kill a character (or the whole party), and you'll have to grind a lot to beat the game. There's only one save slot and you can't save when inside the castles, so things can get frustrating fast.

Besides the novel 3D world map, the 2D graphics are also impressive and very original, blending detailed pixel art with more exotic styles, such as 3D wire-frame soldiers or rotoscoped human silhouettes. The interface also deserves praise – *Drakkhen* was one of the first RPGs to allow the player to control each party member individually in real time, yet it does it in a simple and intuitive way. It's just a shame that the adventure game-like actions aren't used much.

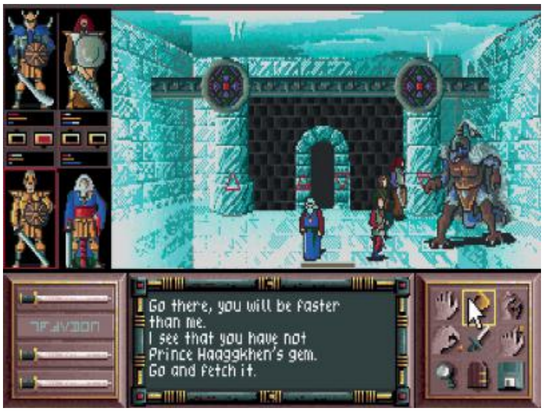
The game was ported to multiple systems, but the SNES version is by far the best. New dialogues, tips, items and a world map were added, while the difficulty was reduced, with cheap deaths removed.

Overall, *Drakkhen* is an outstanding feat of both technology and creativity – an experimental title that was way ahead of its time. The result is an original and weird title, but also an opaque and frustrating RPG. Regardless, it's definitely worth a look. **FE**

The ending of *Drakkhen* teased a sequel, but Infogrames never made it. Kemco, the Japanese company responsible for the SNES port, released *Super Drakkhen* in 1994, a loosely related side-scroller.

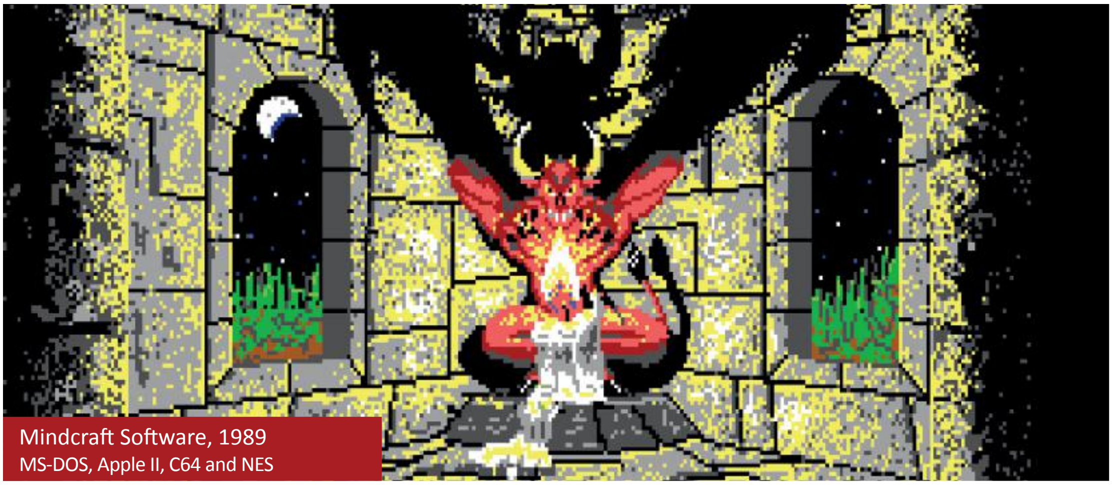

VICTORIA cures the group
CAPITU receives
24 damage points

Drakkhen has exotic enemies such as giant dog heads, 3D polygons and the silhouette of a woman dancing and shouting "I love you"


Go there, you will be faster
than me.
I see that you have not
Prince Haaggkhen's gem.
Go and fetch it.

While the game has an open world, your quest must be done in a specific order and manner, which aren't always clear; the dialogues don't help much either

The Magic Candle



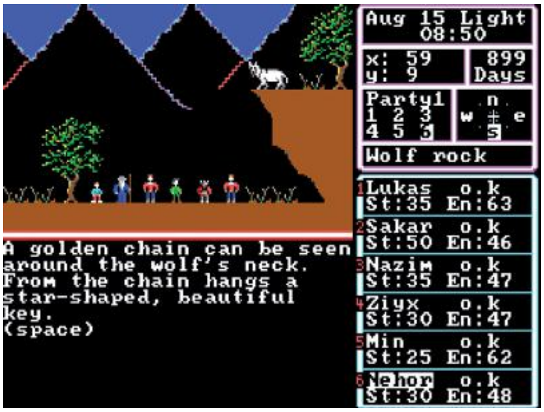
Mindcraft Software, 1989
MS-DOS, Apple II, C64 and NES

Mindcraft Software was founded by Ali Atabek, who previously created *Rings of Zilfin*. The company was best known for its *Magic Candle* trilogy and for *Siege* (1992).

The Magic Candle is one of those rare CRPGs, along with *Ultima V*, *Betrayal at Krondor* and *Baldur's Gate II*, that does everything right. Background story, NPC interaction, puzzles, exploration and combat: *Magic Candle* does it all well, and the end product is a well-rounded, solid CRPG.

The background story is a variation of the tired old "evil demon/mage/warlord is threatening to conquer the world and only YOU can stop him" plot. The twist is that, in this game, the evil demon starts imprisoned in a magic candle, but said candle is melting. The goal of the game is to prevent the candle from melting down and the demon from escaping. You have a limited number of days to achieve this, which varies based on the difficulty setting chosen.

So time is of the essence in *Magic Candle* - literally. The logistics of time management is one of the things that sets the game apart from so many other CRPGs. Everything takes time, from travelling to memorising spells, working for money and training skills. So while on a ship voyage that takes three days, your spell casters can memorise lots of spells, for example.



```
A golden chain can be seen
around the wolf's neck.
From the chain hangs a
star-shaped, beautiful
key.
(space)
```

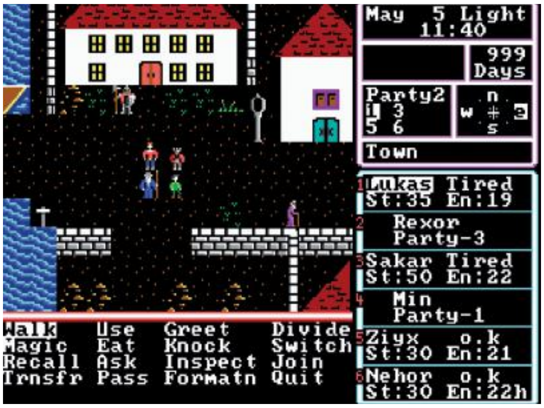
Your goal is to find a way to stop the magic candle from melting, by collecting the various items required

Which brings us to another novel thing in the game – splitting the party. It's possible to have some characters exploring a dungeon, while one character is making money in a city in another part of the world and yet another character is memorising spells at an inn in a different town. Usually, you'll want all your characters present in dungeons, but when exploring a city, it can be a good idea to have one character (preferably one with high Charisma) do the exploring, while the others make money, rest, train or memorise spells. Splitting the party is also important in order to solve some of the problems in the game.

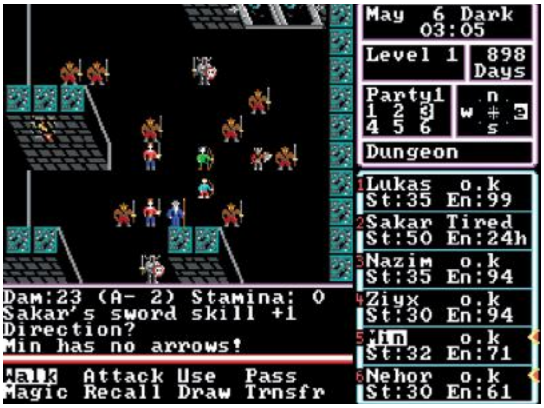
Magic Candle looks like an old *Ultima* game, in which you control a party or a character on a top-down map. There are several types of map – the overland map, the castle and town maps, and the dungeon maps. Combat takes place directly on the dungeon map, or switches to a separate combat map if you are on the overland.

The combat system is among the better turn-based systems. It's not very complex, but has many unique features, like different kind of mushrooms you can eat to get various combat bonuses, the ability to sidestep attacks (if not blocked on the sides), and the ability to pierce several enemies with one arrow. It's quite simple, but also quite tactical and fun. The monsters are a mix of generic types like orcs and trolls, and original, exotic ones like hraffels, zorlims and bargs.

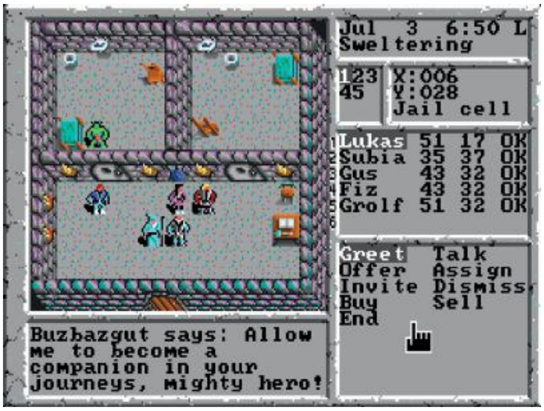
An important part of the game is talking to NPCs to find clues on how to stop the candle from burning down. Lots and lots of note-taking (or screen-capping) is needed. NPCs also have schedules, as in *Ultima 5–7*, and finding them can sometimes be a challenge in itself. Some of them won't even leave their houses and you have to knock on their doors, but they won't open unless you address them by their names.


May 5 Light
11:40
999 Days
Party2
1 3
5 6
n
w + e
s
Town
Lukas Tired
St:35 En:19
Rexor
Party-3
Sakar Tired
St:50 En:22
Min
Party-1
Ziyx o.k
St:30 En:21
Nehor o.k
St:30 En:22h
Walk Use Greet Divide
Magic Eat Knock Switch
Recall Ask Inspect Join
Trnsfr Pass Formatn Quit

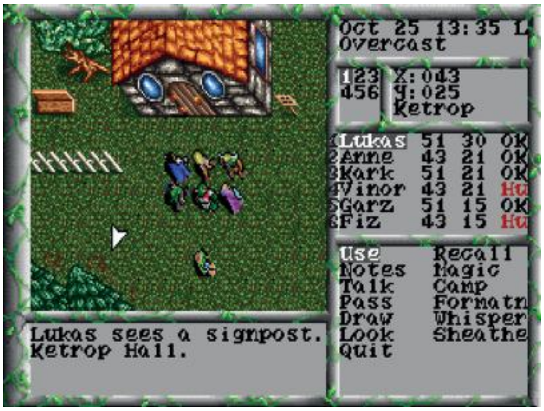
Your party moves as a block, but you can split them into individuals or groups to explore, solve puzzles, train and work


Dam:23 (A- 2) Stamina: 0
Sakar's sword skill +1
Direction?
Min has no arrows!
May 6 Dark
03:05
Level 1
898 Days
Party1
1 2 3
4 5 6
n
w + e
s
Dungeon
Lukas o.k
St:35 En:99
Sakar Tired
St:50 En:24h
Nazim o.k
St:35 En:94
Ziyx o.k
St:30 En:94
Min o.k
St:32 En:71
Nehor o.k
St:30 En:61
Walk Attack Use Pass
Magic Recall Draw Trnsfr

Combat is turn-based and quite simple, but you'll have to manage the characters' ammo, food and rest to succeed


Buzbazgut says: Allow me to become a companion in your journeys, mighty hero!
Jul 3 6:50 L
Sweltering
123
45
X:006
Y:028
Jail cell
Lukas 51 17 OK
Subia 35 37 OK
Gus 43 32 OK
Fiz 43 32 OK
Grolf 51 32 OK
Greet Talk
Offer Assign
Invite Dismiss
Buy Sell
End

Magic Candle II introduced mouse control and improved graphics, but also removed the ability to split your party


Lukas sees a signpost.
Ketrop Hall.
Oct 25 13:35 L
Overcast
123
456
X:043
Y:025
Ketrop
Lukas 51 30 OK
Anne 43 21 OK
Kark 51 21 OK
Vinor 43 21 HU
Garz 51 15 OK
Fiz 43 15 HU
Use Recall
Notes Magic
Talk Camp
Pass Formatn
Draw Whisper
Look Sheathe
Quit

Magic Candle III had nice graphics and a good story, but its gameplay felt archaic next to that of other RPGs at the time

Speaking of names, you take the role of Lukas, a young Ranger, and can recruit up to five companions from around 30 NPCs of five different races and nine different professions, who have different strengths and weaknesses. The characters have most of the traditional CRPG stats and skills, but also some rare ones like hunting and armourer skills, and unique ones like gem-cutting, tailoring and carpentry.

There are no XP or levels; a character's stats and skills increase through various methods, from practice and training to more adventurous ones, and individual characters have different aptitudes for the various stats and skills.

The Magic Candle feels more like a simulation than most CRPGs do. You need lots of items to survive in the wilderness, like food, arrows, ropes, and many special items that are useful in dungeons. There is also a day-night cycle, the need to sleep and rest, and to repair weapons and armour. Shops open and close, and ships leave on certain days. If you like logistics, you'll like *The Magic Candle*.

If there are any negative things I could say about *The Magic Candle* it's that the weaponry and armour selection is rather sparse and there are no random drops, and maybe that the game is a bit too long, with too much combat towards the end. Skills and stats maxing before the end and no random loot makes combat too much of a chore, in the end.

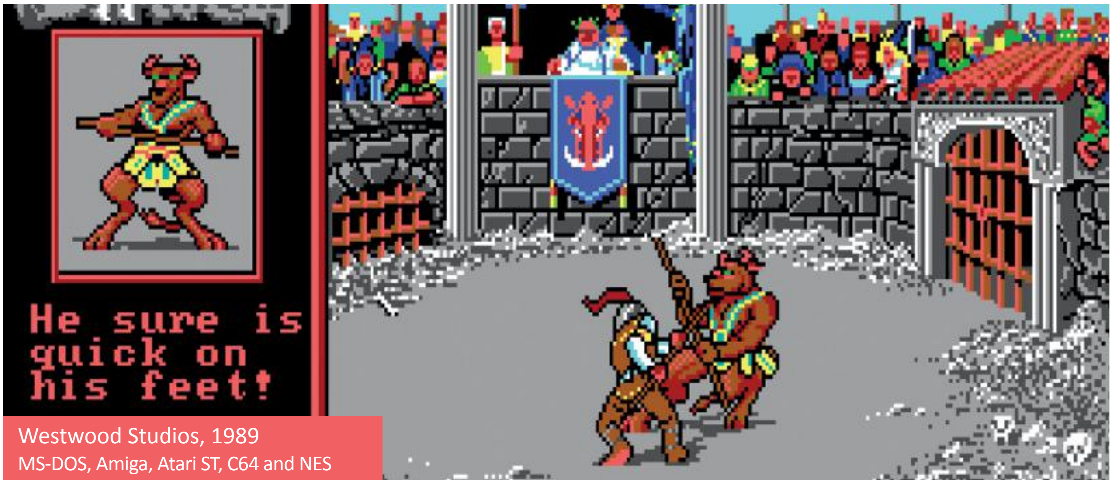
Speaking of the end, *The Magic Candle* has one of the most unique ways of winning a CRPG, ending not with a battle or dungeon crawl, but by asking you to perform an elaborate ritual to rebuild the candle.

The Magic Candle was followed by two sequels: *The Magic Candle II - The Four and Forty* (1991) and *Magic Candle III* (1992). While their plots remained unique, gameplay was streamlined and padded with combat, faring poorly against games like *Ultima VI*.

Mindcraft Software also produced two spin-offs set in the same world: *The Keys to Maramon* (1990), an early action RPG, and *Bloodstone: An Epic Dwarven Tale* (1993), based on *Magic Candle III*'s engine. The company would close its doors soon after. **OC**

The Magic Candle **was chosen as "RPG of the Year" by Computer Gaming World in 1989, which also gave it an award for "Most Rewarding Ending" in 1996.**

Hillsfar

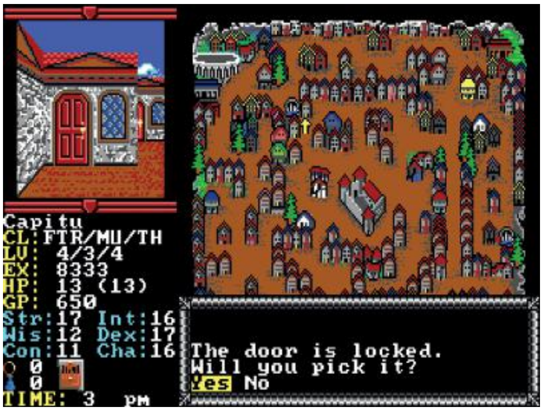


```
He sure is
quick on
his feet!
```

Westwood Studios, 1989
MS-DOS, Amiga, Atari ST, C64 and NES

Part of SSI's *AD&D* series, *Hillsfar* is a very elaborate side-quest and, like all side-quests, there are rewards to be had for those daring enough to seek them.

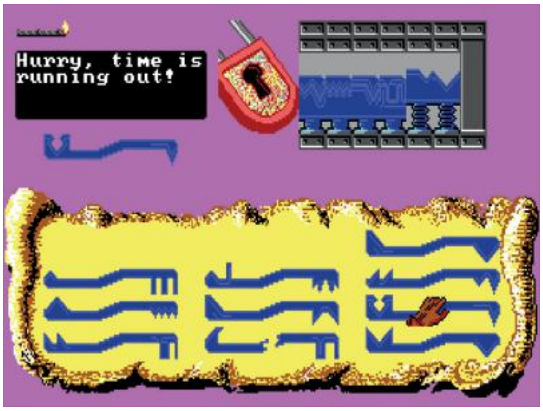
Instead of importing your characters from *Pool of Radiance* straight into *Curse of the Azure Bonds*, you can import them into *Hillsfar*, then transfer them back out. Characters cannot level up in *Hillsfar*, but the experience they earn will transfer with them.



```
Capitu
CL: FTR/MU/TH
LV:  4/3/4
EX:  8333
HP:  13 (13)
GP:  650
Str:17  Int:16
Wis:12  Dex:17
Con:11  Cha:16
    0
    0
TIME: 3   pm
```

```
The door is locked.
Will you pick it?
Yes  No
```

You can visit guilds, stores, and pubs, or you can break in by lock-picking or using a magical Ring of Knock



```
Hurry, time is
running out!
```

To pick locks you must find the correct pick for each tumbler; besides the time limit, you must be careful of traps and of breaking the picks

The game plays very differently from its Gold Box brethren. Your party camps outside the city of Hillsfar, where the mage Maalthiir has taken power, outlawed magic and oppressed the populace.

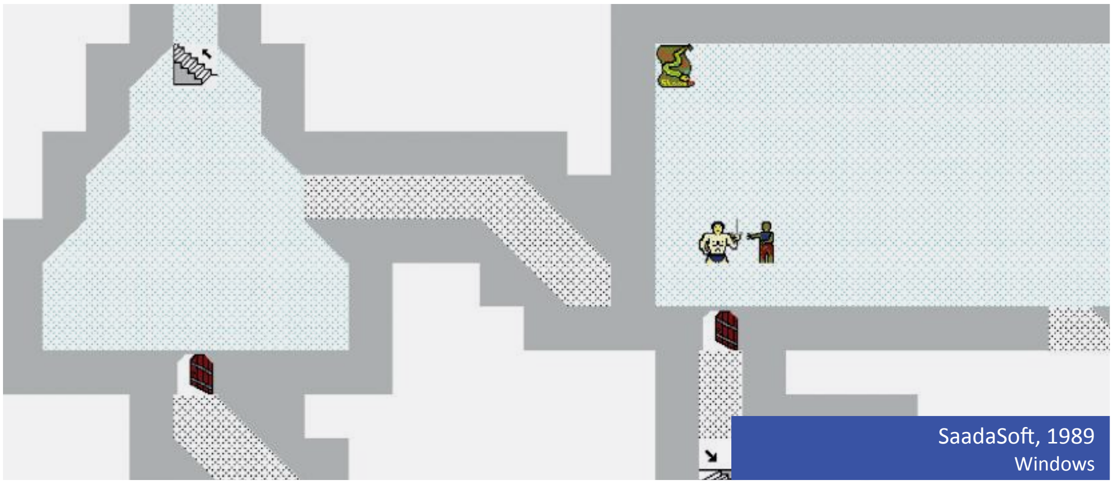
You take individual characters inside the city to quest alone. Based on their class, they find quests by visiting their respective guilds. Quests range from finding lost items to investigating a kidnapping, and may require you to fight for information in the arena or check out the latest gossip in the taverns. Three quests, with increasing rewards, are available for each class.

Most of the action takes place in the form of arcade segments. Travelling to outlying areas requires riding a horse across dirt roads while avoiding obstacles. Investigating locations (or breaking into them) takes place from a top-down perspective, as you explore mazes for treasure and clues, avoiding town guards and magical traps. There is an archery range where you may compete for prizes and an arena where you may fight for the same (sometimes your life).

All combat takes place in the arena, and since magic is outlawed, magic users will not be permitted to cast spells during the game. The mini-games are the same regardless of your class, though it will affect certain aspects of them. For instance, chests that you find will often be locked, and you can either force them open, risking dangerous traps, or, if you are a thief, you can engage in a lock-picking mini-game that requires good eyes and fast fingers.

Although as a standalone title the game can be tedious, considering the lack of an overarching quest, as a companion piece to *Pool of Radiance* and *Curse of the Azure Bonds* and a chance to build your characters beyond the usual methods of experience farming, *Hillsfar* is an entertaining diversion and a fun place to explore. **CA**

Castle of the Winds



SaadaSoft, 1989
Windows

Castle of the Winds is one of the few CRPGs I remember playing and winning as a child of the ’90s, partly because it was available as shareware to set up the commercially released second part of the story, so the first part was shorter. Beyond that, it has an addictive charm derived both from its Roguelike, tile-based dungeon-delving and its clean, window-based interface.

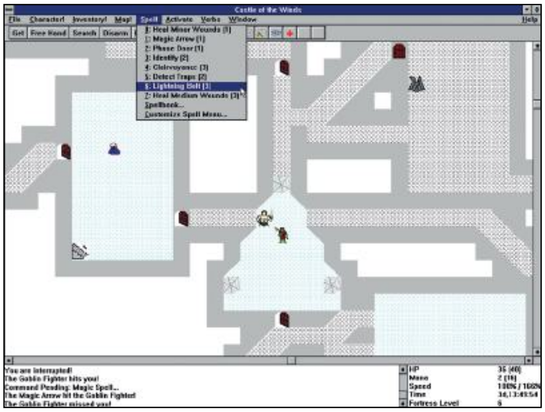
Originally produced in 1989 as an early piece of software using the Windows graphical shell in MS-DOS by Rick Saada, it was released with its sequel in 1993 by Epic MegaGames. In the first part, *A Question of Vengeance*, you are an orphan who must avenge the destruction of your hometown and retrieve a stolen amulet given to you by your parents. After two dungeons and a boss, finding and activating the amulet allows the character to be imported into the second part, subtitled *Lifthransir’s Bane*, which features a much larger town and many more items, enemies, and encounters. Its deep dungeon has 25 levels with multiple bosses and monster hordes.

What earns *Castle of the Winds* a notable place in CRPG history is its unique blend of Norse mythology and addictive dungeon crawling in one of the earliest Windows-based graphical interfaces. Today that gives it a utilitarian aesthetic but, unlike most Roguelikes, its gameplay is mouse-driven, with a drag-and-drop inventory and a customisable spell button bar.

There are no classes or races, so characters can use every item and spell. A new spell is granted each level, and more can be learned from books. The game is entirely turn-based, but time passes in varying increments depending on actions taken. Inventory is measured in both bulk and weight, so packs can run out of room even if the PC can carry more weight. The dungeon levels are persistent once generated, plus a few have set encounters, such as a memorable potion-shaped spider room, or a prisoner to free within a limited time. Foes include vicious wildlife, humans, standard fantasy creatures, undead spirits and specifically Norse monsters like jotun – giants.

While some aspects of the game are very simple, *Castle of the Winds* has enough complexity to satisfy that itch to explore dungeons, increase in strength and tackle ever fiercer enemies. **AS**

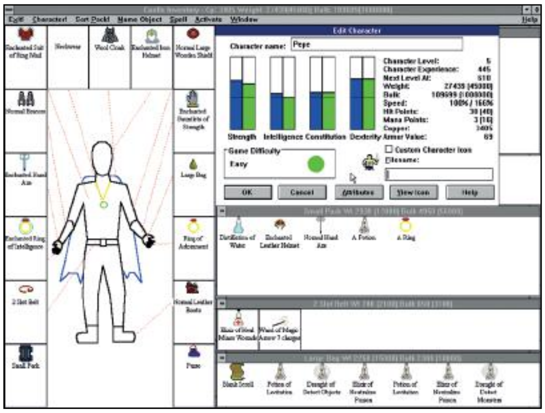
In 1998, Saada released both parts of *Castle of the Winds* as freeware on his website.



You are interrupted!
The Goblin Fighter hits you!
Command Pending: Magic Spell...
The Magic Arrow hit the Goblin Fighter!
The Goblin Fighter missed you!

HP 35 (40)
Mana 2 (16)
Speed 100% / 100%
Time 3d,13:49:54
Fortress Level 6

The Windows-based interface sets the game apart from others of the time, with its drop-down menus and mouse-driven gameplay



Character name: Pepe

Character Level: 5
Character Experience: 445
Next Level At: 510
Weight: 27438 (45000)
Bulk: 109699 (100000)
Speed: 100% / 166%
Hit Points: 30 (40)
Mana Points: 3 (16)
Armor Value: 69

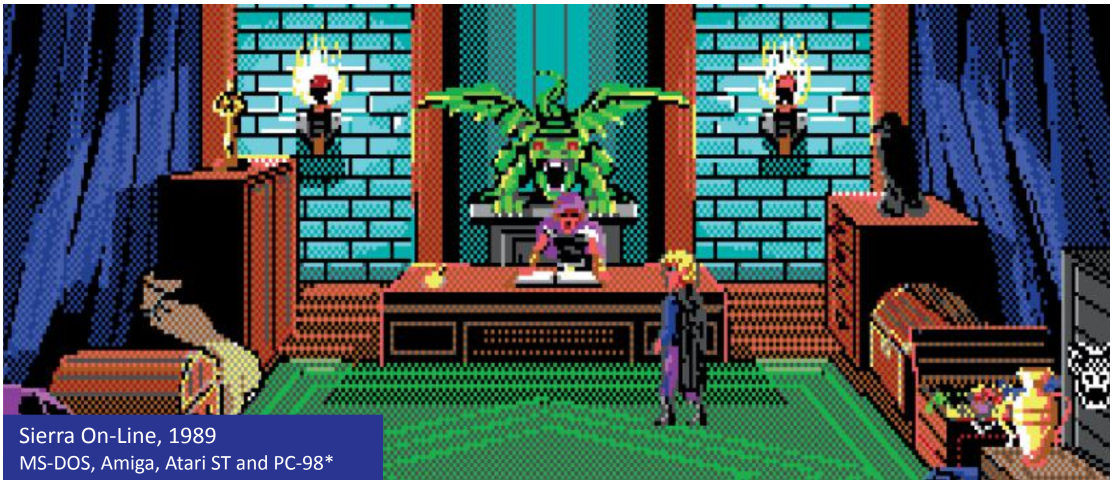
Game Difficulty: Easy

The stats and items are simple, and the graphical interface is very intuitive, keeping the game accessible to those new to Roguelikes

Quest for Glory:

So You Want to Be a Hero

*A remake of ***Quest for Glory I*** was released in 1992, sporting new, colourful VGA graphics and a full point-and-click interface.

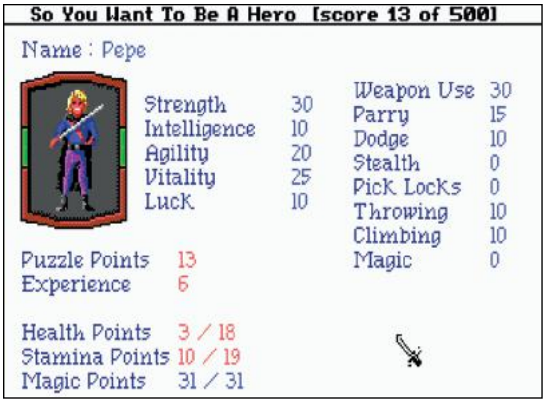


Sierra On-Line, 1989
MS-DOS, Amiga, Atari ST and PC-98*

What's in a name? In the case of *Quest for Glory*, an unfortunate story. The series originally began as *Hero's Quest*, before Milton Bradley pointed at the board game and gave a meaningful cough. It's a shame, because while *Quest For Glory* is arguably a better title, it's really not what the series has ever been about.

For creators Lori and Corey Cole, heroism is a thing to aspire towards for its own sake – the importance of being the light in the darkness, of saving the world through simple human compassion as much as beating up whatever threatens it, and of doing the right thing not because you're thinking of the reward, but because it's the right thing to do.

Quest for Glory starts its hero's journey like many others – a young man approaching a small town, hoping to make his name. (Originally there were plans for other character options, including races, but space was at a premium.) It offered a mix of classic graphic adventure gaming and RPG elements, though unsurprisingly for a Sierra game with 'Quest' in the title, it leaned more heavily to the adventure side.



So You Want To Be A Hero [score 13 of 500]

Name : Pepe

Strength	30	Weapon Use	30
Intelligence	10	Parry	15
Agility	20	Dodge	10
Vitality	25	Stealth	0
Luck	10	Pick Locks	0
		Throwing	10
		Climbing	10
Puzzle Points	13	Magic	0
Experience	6		

Health Points 3 / 18
Stamina Points 10 / 19
Magic Points 31 / 31

You can create hybrid characters, such as a fighter who can cast spells or pick locks, but some acts are locked to specific classes

In particular, it didn't matter how good your stats were; the game was full of instant death if you annoyed characters or got caught breaking the rules. Pick a fight with a thief, for instance, and there's not even a battle. Just click, boom, comedy death message.

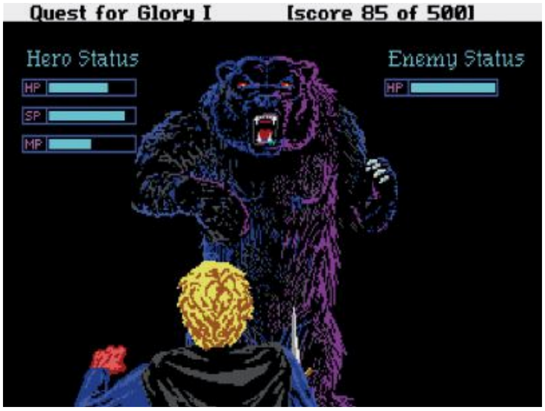
The RPG side breathed a lot of life into the world though, with your choice of character class allowing three paths through the game – Fighter, Magic User and Thief. Later games would add Paladin to this, either by importing the hero from the previous game or as a title that had to be earned through good deeds.

In the first game, that meant a Magic User could challenge local wizard Erasmus and his pet rat, Fenrus, (or local rat Fenrus and his pet wizard, Erasmus, depending on who you ask) to a magical mini-game duel, while the Thief could join the local guild and break into houses to somewhat unheroically liberate them of their loot.

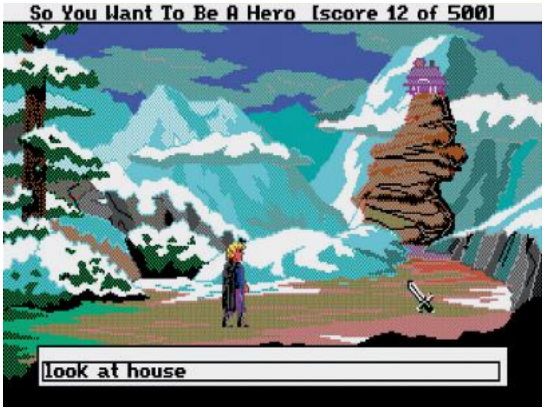
They also have one of the best deaths in Sierra's murderous history – using the Lock-pick on yourself with low skill leads to you stabbing yourself in the brain and dying instantly. With high skills? Congratulations! You successfully picked your nose. Warning: Avoid *Quest for Glory* if you don't like puns.

The adventure side of the game mostly comes through in puzzles, dialogue, and the general feel of the game, though never to the crazy lengths of most dedicated adventures. It's more about using tools at your disposal, with the game playing fair.

If you need to retrieve an item and you have a spell to do that, then said spell will either work or at least give a reason why it doesn't. If it looks like a surface can be climbed to get an item, it probably can be. It might take some stat grinding to get good enough, and there might be an easier way, like casting Levitate, but it'll usually work.

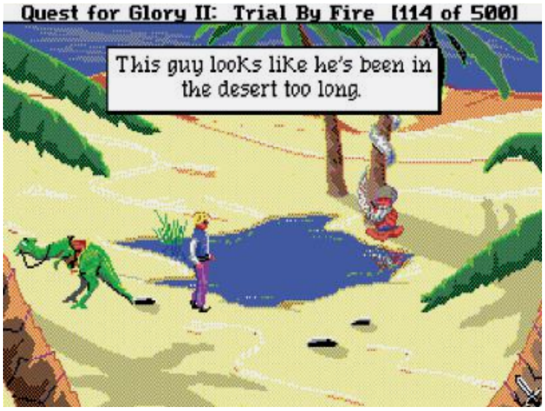


Combat is very simple: you can dodge or parry attacks with a shield, but often it's better to just keep attacking



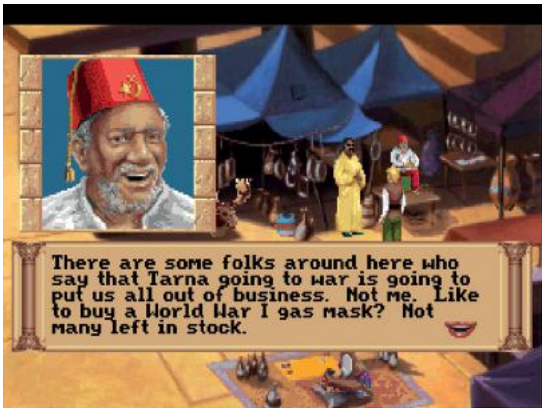
look at house

The game uses Sierra's SCI0 engine from *King's Quest IV,* allowing for mouse control but still requiring a text parser



This guy looks like he's been in the desert too long.

Quest for Glory II sends you to a labyrinthine Arabic city, imperilled by elementals and surrounded by a vast desert



There are some folks around here who say that Tarna going to war is going to put us all out of business. Not me. Like to buy a World War I gas mask? Not many left in stock.

The third game made the transition to VGA graphics and replaced the text parser with point-and-click controls

The downside of this is that the RPG elements are limited. Combat especially is mini-game hell from the very start to the very end of the series; only the details change. There's very little in the way of gear too, with usually only a couple of upgrades per game.

It's best to think of these elements as seasoning rather than a major part of the meal, manifest more in elements like side-quests that you can take on, the ability to wander more or less freely around the world, day-night cycles in which the worst monsters usually come out at night, and the need to eat and sleep.

Being based on adventures did, however, allow for a much stronger narrative than most RPGs back in 1989. The series made great use of this, with each game set in a different location with its own rules.

For *Quest for Glory I*, it's the European village of Spielburg, where everything is familiar. *Quest for Glory II: Trial by Fire* (1991) took the hero to Arabia, with most of the action taking place in one big city where events happen on set days and have to be dealt with before it's too late; you then leave with a caravan to sort out the mastermind behind it all. *Quest for Glory III: Wages of War* (1992) remains one of the few games to explore Africa, focusing on war and the hunt for a lost city.

Collectively, these become more than just a travelogue, with the hero constantly being exposed to both what people want, and what they really need – facing evil enemies who have to be stopped, but also learning that appearances can be deceptive.

In *QFG1* for instance, there's a group of bandits terrorising a valley. The big reveal is that their leader is the local baron's enchanted daughter, but the route to learning that makes a point of showing her to be more than just a snarling villain. She has honour. She makes a point of personally intervening when her men attack one of the villagers and getting him medical treatment. She has nuance, and while not all of the baddies are similarly redeemable, that nuance runs through every plot point and every decision made in the series.

Heroism, it repeatedly emphasises, relies just as much on seeing the good in people as the bad. There are worse lessons for a game to teach, whether you want to be a hero or not. **RC**

***While the second game was released with only EGA graphics, a free fan remake with VGA graphics was released in 2008, made by AGD Interactive.**

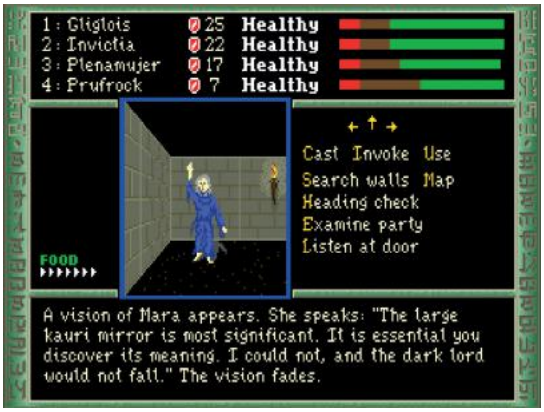
The Dark Heart of Uukrul

Brøderbund Software, 1989
MS-DOS and Apple II

The Dark Heart of Uukrul is my favourite RPG of all time. I should be angry that it is so obscure and overlooked, but I realise this game caters only to a very specific kind of RPG fan.

Uukrul's achievement lies in the unorthodox ideas inherent in each of its components – it features some of the best dungeon, puzzle and character development design in the history of the genre, but also combines them into a highly memorable whole.

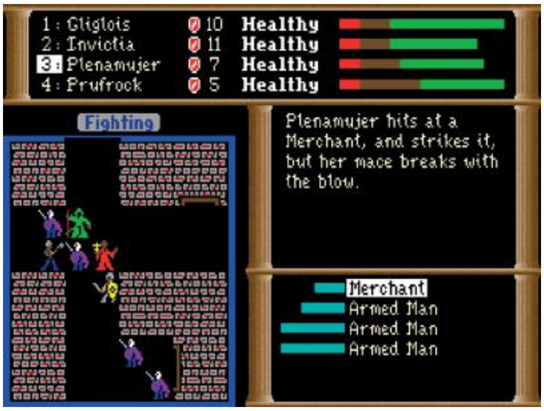
> "We did set out to make the game memorable, and the things the player remembers most are solving challenges, not hacking up monsters."
>
> *- Ian Boswell, Uukrul's designer*



```
1 : Gliglois     25  Healthy
2 : Invictia     22  Healthy
3 : Plenamujer   17  Healthy
4 : Prufrock      7  Healthy
```

A vision of Mara appears. She speaks: "The large kauri mirror is most significant. It is essential you discover its meaning. I could not, and the dark lord would not fall." The vision fades.

You explore the dungeon in first-person, following the visions and remains of a party who came before you but failed to slay the evil Uukrul



```
1 : Gliglois     10  Healthy
2 : Invictia     11  Healthy
3 : Plenamujer    7  Healthy
4 : Prufrock      5  Healthy
```

Plenamujer hits at a Merchant, and strikes it, but her mace breaks with the blow.

During encounters the game switches to top-down tactical turn-based combat, similar to that in the Gold Box series

Uukrul emphasises teamwork in a way that few other RPGs do, requiring each of your characters' input for combat and puzzle-solving alike. That, however, comes at the cost of fixing the party composition – your group inevitably consists of a Fighter, a Paladin, a Magician and a Priest.

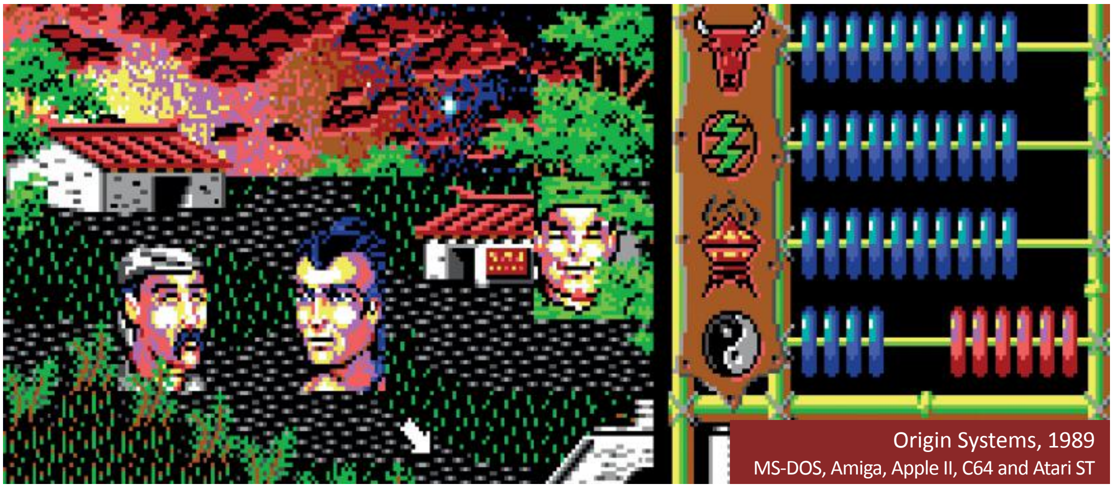
While the first two classes are fairly traditional, the magic system is where *Uukrul* shines again. Both the Priest and the Magician gain not only in levels, but also in the number and quality of rings they have equipped, each dedicated to a specific deity or magic arcanum. Obtaining new rings is a separate form of character progression, unique in how tightly *DHoU* ties it to the exploration process as well as to the dungeon lore. Deciphering the Priest's prayers is also an exciting task – a puzzle that relies as much on studying the manual as it does on in-game experimentation.

What made me completely and irreversibly fall in love with the game, however, was its dungeons: the Cube, designed in "true" 3D, so that the overall layout is seamless and makes sense; the oddness of the Battlefield maze with a spinner trap that haunts me still; the Palace, a "meta" role-playing area emphasising the concept of chance via the roll of a die; and, of course, the Chaos, the most unorthodox and ingenious level ever created for an RPG – encounter-free and illusion-based, yet logical and climactic, alone worth a full playthrough of the game.

I can't think of any other dungeon crawler that can top *Uukrul* when it comes to dungeon design; *Wizardry IV* and *Chaos Strikes Back* are probably the only ones that come close.

Released just a bit too late to become popular, with dated graphics and sound limitations, *The Dark Heart of Uukrul* has since been rediscovered and is now enjoying niche cult classic status. **CB**

Windwalker



Origin Systems, 1989
MS-DOS, Amiga, Apple II, C64 and Atari ST

In 1985 Origin published *Moebius: The Orb of Celestial Harmony*, an odd RPG by Greg Malone. It was a mediocre *Ultima*-clone, but it stood out due to its Chinese-based setting, bizarre art style and, especially, its real-time martial arts combat, inspired by fighting games like *Karateka* (1984).

The sequel, *Windwalker*, went one step further. While its predecessor's combat was reflex-based, you could now battle in turn-based mode, creating a fascinating fighting system that allows you to carefully choose your next move from a menu. Moreover, a real-time replay can be seen afterwards, making it all look like a fierce martial-arts duel.

So why isn't such a cool game talked about more? Because combat quickly becomes one of *Windwalker*'s worst aspects. Attacks have a rock-paper-scissors logic to them – once you understand your opponent's moves, you'll know how to counter their attacks. But you can use only two fighting styles and there's only four enemy types in the game – one being the final boss! Worse yet, enemies spawn constantly, turning battles into a chore that drags the entire game down.

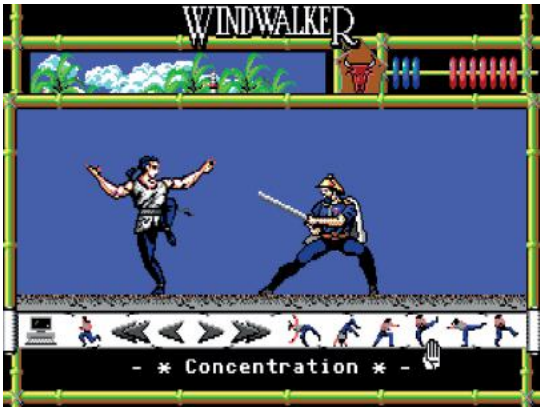
Regardless, there isn't much to see here anyway. There's no character creation, stats or skills – you just grow stronger as you play. The world is small, composed of tiny islands, a huge empty ocean, very few NPCs and only three quests. Thus, the frequent battles feel like lazy padding for what's otherwise a 2- to 3-hour game.

The Chinese-inspired setting is richly described in the manual (with a bibliography!) and there's even an NPC who will read your fortune using the *I Ching*, but otherwise it's tragically underused. You get some magic chants, a mostly irrelevant honour code, mythological creatures and that's about it. Still, the game does look very distinctive, using heads as icons and a perspective that rolls vertically, as if the world was a cylinder.

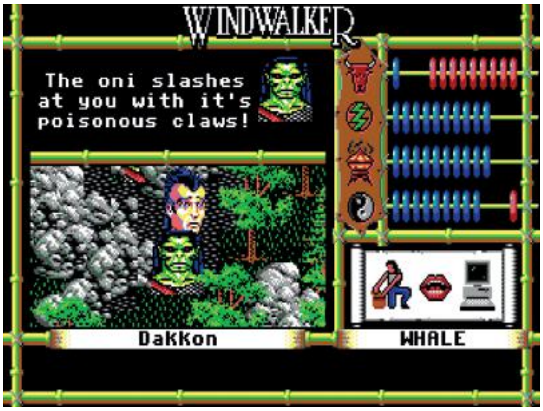
Finally, there's a clever save and permadeath system: if you lose to a guard, he will capture you, not kill you. And you can save anywhere. But if do you die, the game autosaves – die 10 times and it's game over.

In the end, *Windwalker* is one of those games that I really wanted to like – it looks so original and creative! Sadly, what looks like its greatest strength – the combat – only drags it down instead. And the rest of the game simply isn't good enough to make up for that. **FE**

In *Moebius: The Orb of Celestial Harmony* and *Windwalker*, you're guided by Moebius, Greg Malone's alter ego. Malone would later work on *Ultima VI* and direct *Duke Nukem 3D*.



The turn-based martial arts combat feels great at first, but the frequent battles and lack of enemy variety quickly turns it into a chore



The oni slashes at you with it's poisonous claws!

You'll only battle human opponents; other creatures serve as obstacles that you must avoid, usually by using magic or special items

Knights of Legend

Origin Systems, 1989
MS-DOS, Apple II and C64

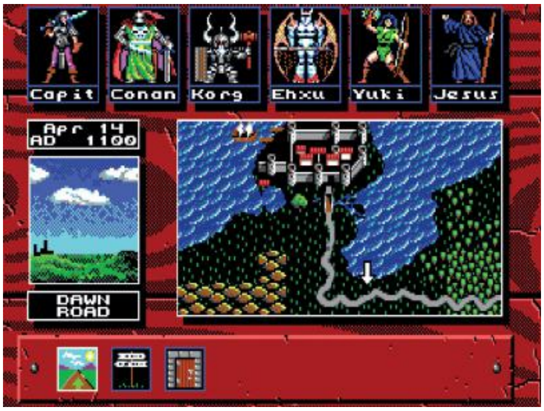
Not only did *Knights of Legend* have great artwork for its time, but it also came with an edit tool, allowing players to customise their character's appearance and shield design.

Knights of Legend's manual opens with a brief retelling of how the game was created: in 1981 a group of four tabletop RPG players sat down in a restaurant to debate tabletop RPGs. They loved complex rulesets, but doing all the calculations they required was slow and tiring.

One of those friends, Todd Mitchell Porter, was a programmer. Upon returning home he began to design a computer RPG that could deliver all that complexity, but was quick and easy to play.

He spent eight years working on the game. When a prototype was done, he showed it to Richard Garriott, who signed him for Origin Systems and published the game in 1989 as *Knights of Legend*.

This little backstory helps to understand what kind of game we're talking about here. From the 150-page manual that describes the fantasy realm of Ashtalarea – including a timeline and an appendix on Elven language – to the fact that every single NPC has a unique portrait and personality, *Knights of Legend* is a gorgeous and extremely ambitious RPG, filled with handcrafted details and passion.



The world map is large and diverse, but there's nothing to do in it besides fighting random encounters and searching for the locations of quest battles

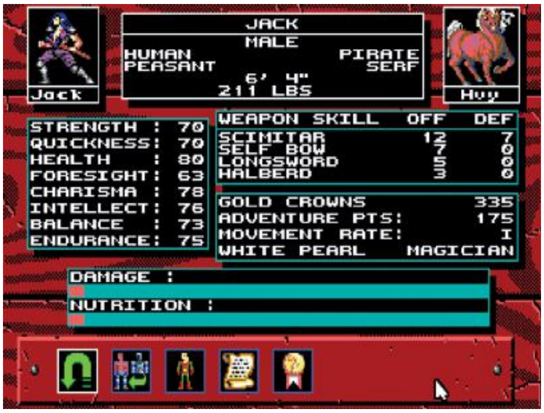
You start by creating a party of six characters. There are Humans, Elves and Dwarves, but also Keldens, a race of gigantic flying humanoids. Instead of classes, you choose from 33 richly described backgrounds, like Dark Guard (former guards of the evil wizard Pildar) or Usip (a small tribe of Elves in danger of extinction). These affect characters' initial stats, weapon skills and wealth, and also how NPCs react to them, as many will refuse to serve a Dark Guard or dislike Dwarves.

Magic is based on Elven words, which must be learned from wizards to create spells that target the enemy type and stats you need. For example, the spell DAYNALON is made of DAY (human), NA (body), L (moderate) and ON (nearby), and will moderately damage the body of a nearby human. Using YR instead of ON would make it a long-range spell, while using AR instead of DAY would make it target Elves.

It sounds cool on paper, but spells are expensive and ridiculously specific: a spell against Ogres is useless against Stone Ogres, making them very hard to use.

Once your party is set, you explore towns in a top-down view, talking to NPCs via *Ultima*-like keywords until you get a quest. The game contains 23 quests you must complete in order to unlock the final quest, but they are largely unrelated and follow the same formula: an NPC asks for an item, you ask around for clues, receive vague hints (like "search north of town") and go to the world map searching for it – which brings us to *Knights of Legend*'s defining feature: combat.

Once a battle begins, you'll be overwhelmed by the number of options available. Combat is turn-based and each turn your characters can move at three speeds (Walk, Run or Sprint), select from dozens of attack combinations – Hack at Head, Slash at Legs, Thrust at Body, Headbutt at Legs, etc – and prepare defensive manoeuvres, like Dodging, Jumping or Backing Up.



JACK
MALE
HUMAN PEASANT
PIRATE SERF
6' 4"
211 LBS

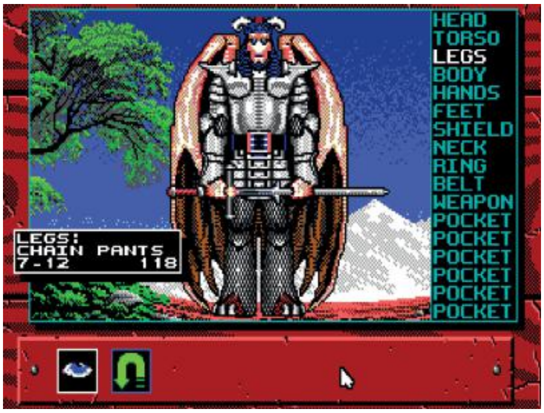
STRENGTH : 70
QUICKNESS: 70
HEALTH : 80
FORESIGHT: 63
CHARISMA : 78
INTELLECT: 76
BALANCE : 73
ENDURANCE: 75

WEAPON SKILL	OFF	DEF
SCIMITAR	12	7
SELF BOW	7	0
LONGSWORD	5	0
HALBERD	3	0

GOLD CROWNS 335
ADVENTURE PTS: 175
MOVEMENT RATE: I
WHITE PEARL MAGICIAN

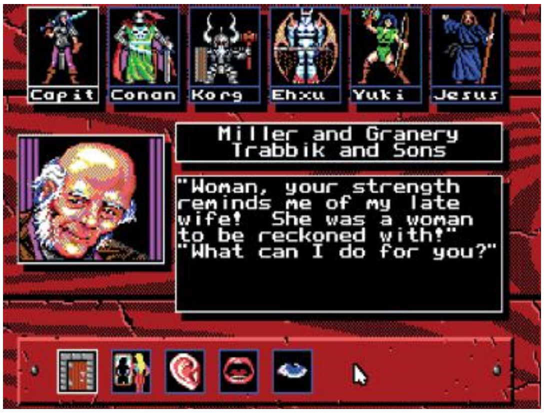
DAMAGE :
NUTRITION :

Character development amounts to improving weapon skills and gaining social ranks, which have little gameplay impact



LEGS:
CHAIN PANTS
7-12 118

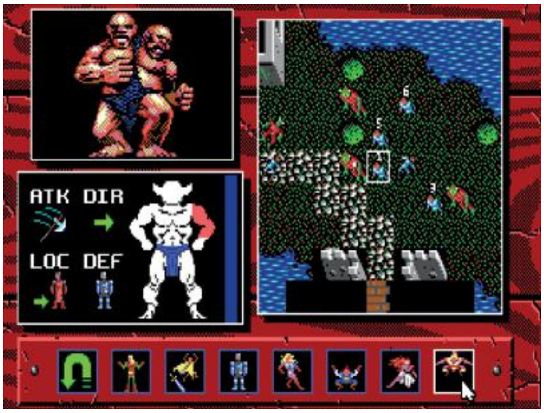
The inventory screen shows a detailed "paper doll" of your character, something new to RPGs at the time



Miller and Granery
Trabbik and Sons

"Woman, your strength reminds me of my late wife! She was a woman to be reckoned with!"
"What can I do for you?"

Every NPC in town has a unique portrait and personality, reacting differently to the various races and backgrounds



The enemy has a wounded arm and I can see it will target my legs, so I can avoid the attack by jumping next turn.

All these options affect damage and hit Chance, but also Fatigue – a vital stat in *Knights of Legend*. Every action causes Fatigue, based on the equipment being used, the wounds sustained and the type of action.

A heavily armoured Kelden may be tough, but he won't be able to fly (or even run) for more than a few rounds without passing out from exhaustion. As such, it's important to balance equipment load, as well as to know when to attack relentlessly and when to rest.

A key feature here is that characters with high Foresight can read enemy movements, allowing you to see what the creature will do and respond accordingly. If he'll target the head of the character in front of him, you can order that character to duck to avoid the blow.

It's one of the most complex combat systems in any RPG, but it has a huge flaw: it's excruciatingly slow. Every turn, for each of six characters, you must select where to move, how fast to move, how to attack, where to attack, how to defend and confirm each action. Not only is there a lot to do and the interface is sluggish, but enemies require several blows to be defeated. Killing a single Orc in an open field can take more than 10 minutes.

Moreover, while random encounters are always fought in small areas, quest battles take place in massive dungeons, exacerbating the issue. If repositioning your party is already a slow task, then scouting huge areas in search of quest items and surviving enemies is the CRPG equivalent of Chinese water torture – a single battle against a few enemies can last over three hours!

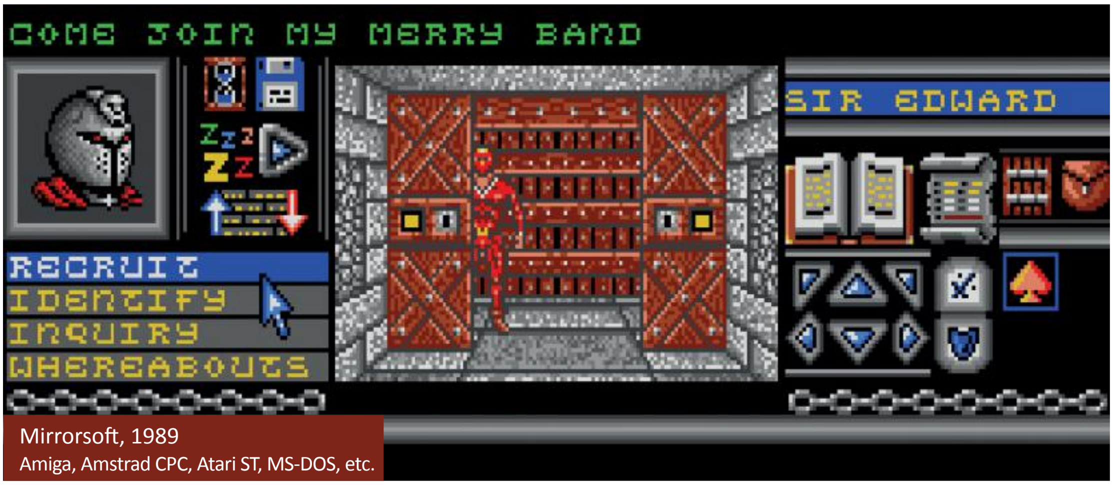
To make matters worse, enemies act predictably and you never face more than one enemy type at once. The formulaic quest design provides little incentive or sense of reward and the last quest has a design error, asking you to report your victories to the wrong NPC.

Still, there's a final nail in the coffin: the only way to save your game is to go back to town, enter an inn and pay for each character to rest. Not only does this mean you can't save and quit during the hour-long battles, but you won't be able to save at all if you're out of money!

It's an ironic fate – *Knights of Legend* was born from a desire to quickly play tactical tabletop RPGs but, while the computer does handle all calculations, the game is so slow and demands so much micro-managing that it's easier to just go back to tabletop RPGs. **FE**

Knights of Legend **was designed to support multiple expansions; the main menu even has an "Install New Region" option. However, the game sold poorly and no expansions were ever made.**

Bloodwych



COME JOIN MY MERRY BAND

Mirrorsoft, 1989
Amiga, Amstrad CPC, Atari ST, MS-DOS, etc.

One interesting aspect of ’80s CRPGs was how they dared try out new ideas, both to be better games and to adopt new technology. Sometimes it worked, sometimes not. *Bloodwych* is a great example of the latter, a game full of cool ideas but barely any praise and recognition for them, especially today. So what happened?

The screenshots show the biggest idea: split-screen. Now two players can try to save the world together.

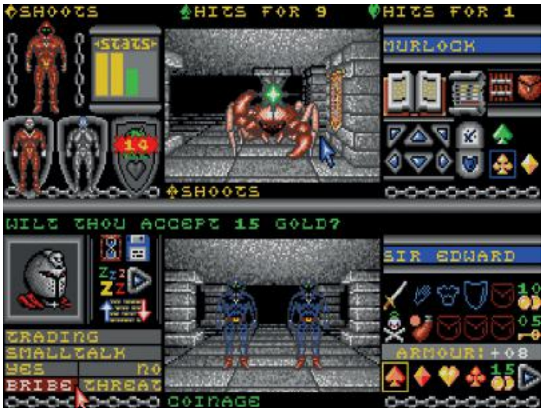
More ideas pop up in the character creation process: pick one of 16 pre-generated champions, sorted by colours and card suits to determine their character class and school of magic. Spades are fighters, Hearts are bards, Clubs are wizards and Diamonds are rogues. With this one champion the player walks about the starting dungeon to find and recruit three more champions using a versatile keyword-based dialogue system that was years ahead of its time. The biggest problem with the two-player mode reveals itself here: the game provides the same quantity of resources regardless of whether a friend tags along or not, meaning that players have to compete for champions, XP, food and gear. As there’s nothing stopping players from attacking each other, a friendly game can turn nasty in a heartbeat.

The dungeons themselves are basic fare – key hunts, fake walls, pressure plates and spinners – and yet the concept of a second player doesn’t play into the level design. In fact, another of the game’s cool ideas is that the party can be split up, which opens up many new gameplay options, which are never used. At no time are multiple parties required to complete the game.

Players can also stop and (try to) talk to monsters they encounter, but short of trade offers or using shops there’s little reason to bother. So many cool ideas, so little done with them. The 8-bit versions of *Bloodwych* even cut out many of these cool ideas.

This was somewhat addressed in the game’s expansion pack, *The Extended Levels*, in which monsters are more chatty, may offer valuable trades and can even be recruited into the party. Sadly the dungeons are no better designed this time around. As a result, *Bloodwych* stands as a house full of unused ideas, ignored by history as bigger games with bigger ideas strode past it to become known classics. **ÁV**

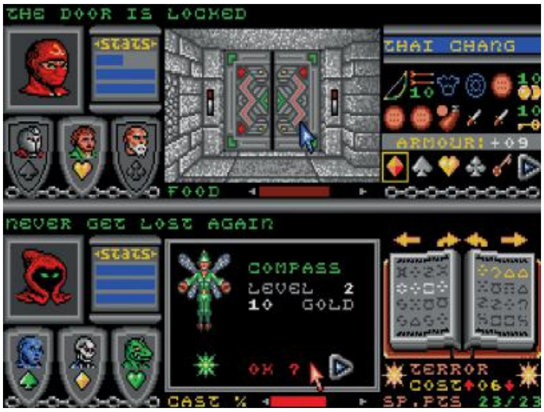
***Bloodwych* was followed by *Hexx: Heresy of the Wizard*. Released in 1994, this was an early 3D dungeon crawler featuring the same heroes, but no multiplayer.**



SHOOTS HITS FOR 9 HITS FOR 1

WILT THOU ACCEPT 15 GOLD?

One player battles a giant crab, while the other tries to bribe his way through a pair of ghost warriors

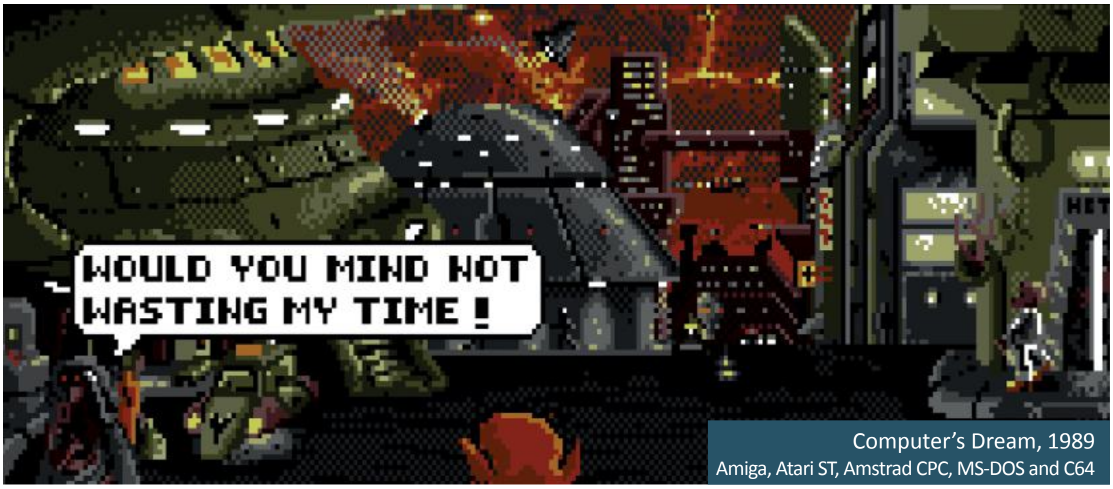


THE DOOR IS LOCKED

NEVER GET LOST AGAIN

The first player tries to figure out a locked door, while the second buys a spell from the magic fairy, which visits heroes when they sleep

B.A.T.



Computer's Dream, 1989
Amiga, Atari ST, Amstrad CPC, MS-DOS and C64

The concept of "cinematic" games may sound like a recent thing, but it has been around for a long time. Cinemaware was a US company famous in the '80s for making movie-like games with amazing graphics but very simple gameplay segments.

This concept fascinated Hervé Lange, a young French developer who had just made a name for himself by creating *Fer & Flamme* (1986), a French-only open-world RPG published by Ubisoft. Inspired by Cinemaware and the new Amiga computers, Lange put together a team and aimed for something much bigger – he wanted a complex, movie-like game.

B.A.T. is that dream game – a mix of cyberpunk novels, James Bond movies and comic book influences. You are a B.A.T. (Bureau of Astral Troubleshooters) agent on the hunt for the mad scientist Vrangor, who has spread bombs across the city of Terrapolis.

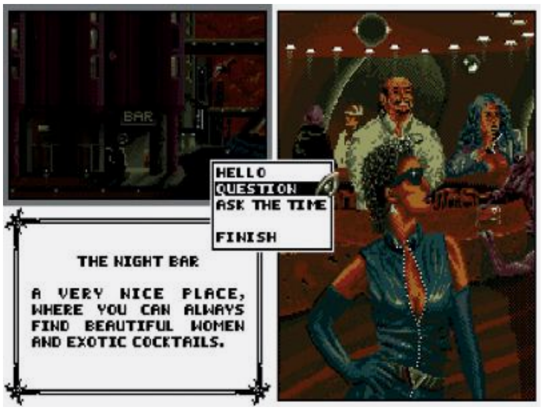
After a quick character creation, you meet your contact at the spaceport and begin your investigation. *B.A.T.* is a truly ambitious game. Using a comic book-like interface, you can freely walk around the city of Terrapolis, trying to find leads while also managing your hunger, thirst and overall health. You will have to program your wrist-mounted computer to translate alien languages, gamble in casinos for money, use phones to make calls, fight thugs, recruit companions, meet with new contacts at specific times, etc.

While all this sounds very promising, a lot of it is misdirection to obfuscate gameplay as simple as that of Cinemaware games. Despite its RPG coating, few stats actually do anything, and the game's solution is almost entirely linear. You will do interesting things such as dance at a club, explore a first-person maze and pilot a spaceship – but only very briefly, more as mini-games. Even combat is extremely simple and largely optional, with only two mandatory battles.

It's a design based on constantly surprising the player with cool new things, to a degree unmatched at the time. What Lange and his team did was try to create *Cyberpunk 2077* in 1989, using less than 2MB of data.

The parts are lacking, but the whole worked well enough to get a sequel. *B.A.T. II: The Koshan Conspiracy* (1992) is an even more ambitious game, adding a gladiator arena, implants, space battles, hacking and more – but had become so unintuitive it's almost impenetrable. **FE**

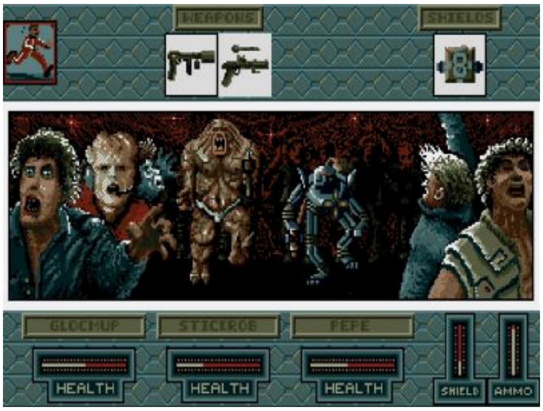
***B.A.T.* was published by Ubisoft, which tried to stop piracy by shipping the Atari ST version of the game with an audio dongle that had to be plugged in for the game to run.**



THE NIGHT BAR

A VERY NICE PLACE, WHERE YOU CAN ALWAYS FIND BEAUTIFUL WOMEN AND EXOTIC COCKTAILS.

The comic book-like exploration is not only an interesting style, it also allows the game to create the illusion of a large city full of details by using just a few art panels



Combat is a shooting mini-game: you pick a weapon and a shield, then use the mouse to drag your crosshairs and shoot the enemies

1990-1994: The creative and technological explosion

The early ’90s are often brought up as a golden age of gaming, filled with innovative and creative releases, and it’s hard to disagree. In just a few years, entire new genres were invented or perfected, spawning still-ongoing series and classic titles still unrivalled.

Dune II set the standard for RTS games; *Wolfenstein 3D* and *Doom* introduced FPSs (or “*Doom*-clones”, as they were known); *Civilization* popularised 4X games; *Alone in the Dark* brought in survival horror; *Street Fighter II*, *Mortal Kombat* and *The King of Fighters* dominated the arcades; platformers had *Super Mario World, Donkey Kong Country*, *Sonic*, *Megaman X*, *Castlevania: Rondo of Blood* and *Super Metroid;* JRPGs had *Earthbound, Final Fantasy VI, Breath of Fire, and Secret of Mana*; LucasArts and Sierra released dozens of amazing adventure games; *Ultima Underworld* showed the world how to do 3D games, and the list goes on and on: *Need for Speed, Warcraft, SimCity 2000, Mario Kart, X-COM, Lemmings, F-Zero, Wing Commander, Star Fox*, etc.

With more people having dial-up connections and access to BBSs, “shareware” began to spread – games like *Epic Pinball*, *Duke Nukem* and *Doom*, as well as several applications, could all be tried for free then fully unlocked by registering them via mail. It was a way for small studios to circumvent retailers and market their games directly. Eventually, many game magazines began to include CD-ROMs filled with shareware titles, as well as demos and game trailers, helping them spread even more.

The hardware side also saw fierce competition. The Super Nintendo vs. SEGA Genesis/Mega Drive is one of the most famous rivalries in gaming history, but lesser-known consoles such as the TurboGrafx-16, Phillips CD-I, NeoGeo and 3DO were also fighting for a spot in the sun.

Deadlier yet was the battle for home computers. Powered by new technology like VGA graphics and Intel i386 processors, IBM PC-Compatibles had proved themselves unstoppable. In 1993 Atari left the battle to focus on their Jaguar console. Commodore soon followed, going bankrupt in 1994. Only Apple endured, struggling to keep its Macintosh relevant.

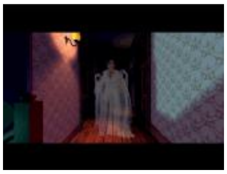
IBM wasn’t the winner either. In 1994 Compaq replaced it as the biggest PC vendor in the US. IBM PC-Compatibles evolved, the industry standard became having *Windows* and an Intel chip – the “Wintel” combo.

While computers were steadily growing popular, it was still a daunting task to buy one: technology evolved fast, competing standards appeared and several factors had to be considered – platform, processor, operating system, modem, audio card, graphics card, CD-ROM and ZIP drives – all very poorly explained to consumers.

But, if you made the right choices, you had the time of your life.

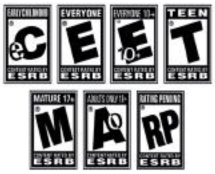
Trends:

CD-ROMs & FMV: While a floppy disk could hold up to 1.4MB, the new CD-ROMs carried 650MB. This massive gain in storage allowed developers to pursue their wildest dreams: not only pre-recorded music instead of MIDI files, but pre-rendered backgrounds, cutscenes and even real actors instead of animated pixels using FMV (Full Motion Video). While it aged poorly, at the time it was hailed as the long-awaited fusion of games and cinema. But system requirements were high: expensive CD-ROM drives, sound and graphic cards.



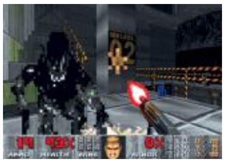
Released in 1993, *The 7th Guest* used real actors as ghosts, and is often credited alongside *Myst* for popularising CD-ROMs

The Entertainment Software Rating Board: While violence and sex in video games was nothing new, the use of real actors in games like *Mortal Kombat* and *Night Trap* led to a reignited controversy and a hearing on the topic in 1993. Nintendo responded by censoring its games, while SEGA created its own rating system. Eventually several game companies partnered to form the Entertainment Software Association (ESA), which led to the creation of the self-regulatory ESRB rating system in 1994.



The ESRB rating was the industry's way of dealing with demands for censorship

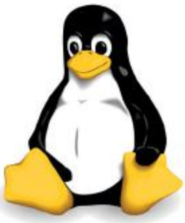
Modding: Programmers have been tinkering with the code of other people's games since the dawn of videogames, but id Software noticed how cumbersome it was to mod *Wolfenstein 3D* and decided to make *Doom* easily moddable – everything needed was contained in WAD ("Where's All the Data?") files. With *Doom*'s massive popularity and the dawn of the Internet, thousands of mods were created. This philosophy was carried into *Quake* and later *Half-Life*, leading to legendary mods like *Team Fortress* and *Counter-Strike*.



Aliens TC is a total conversion mod for *Doom,* based on the movie *Aliens* and released in 1994

The **World Wide Web,** the Internet as we know it today, begins as the first web browser; HTTP, HTML and web pages are created.

The **Super Nintendo** is released. Despite arriving much later than the Genesis/Mega Drive, it "won" the 16-bit generation, selling 41M units.



Linux is first released. Created by Linus Torvalds, it led to free and open-source operational systems used by many companies and users.

Myst uses CD-ROMs to deliver a gorgeous, well-designed and accessible adventure game, becoming the PC's best-selling game.

The **PlayStation** is Sony's first console. A powerful machine that brought 3D graphics into the home, it dominated the market, selling over 100 million units.

1990 | 1991 | 1992 | 1993 | 1994

Windows 3.0 is released. Microsoft partnered with many companies to sell IBM PC-Compatibles with *Windows 3.0* pre-installed, leading to it becoming extremely popular.

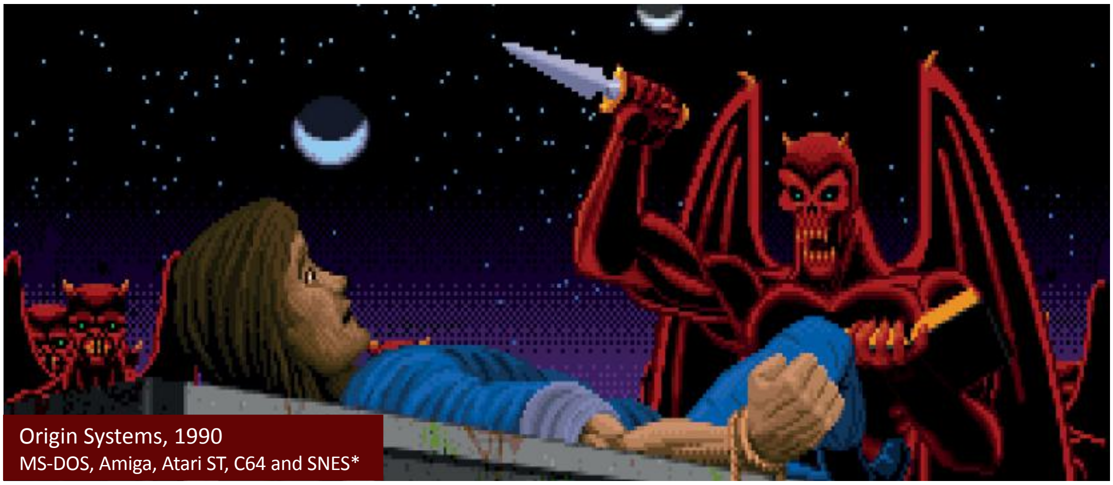
Sonic: The Hedgehog is SEGA's answer to Nintendo's Mario. Faster and edgier, the mascot would become an icon of gaming in the '90s, especially of the Nintendo vs. SEGA console war.

Mortal Kombat not only conquers the arcades and begins a long-standing rivalry with *Street Fighter*, but also has parents up in arms against its violence, paving the way for the ESRB.

Doom arrives, reaching millions of people as shareware. One of the most important games of all time, it popularised first-person shooters, multiplayer deathmatches and modding.

The **SEGA Saturn** is released as a successor to the Genesis/Mega Drive. Expensive, poorly marketed and with many games available only in Japan, the console failed, selling only 9 million units.

Ultima VI:
The False Prophet



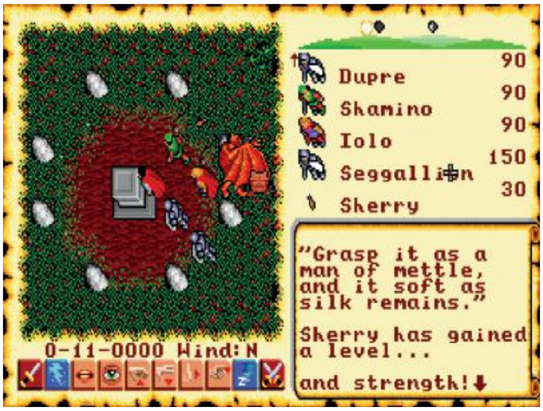
Origin Systems, 1990
MS-DOS, Amiga, Atari ST, C64 and SNES*

***Thanks to Nuvie, *Ultima VI* can also be played under Windows, Linux and Mac OS X. The game also had a Japanese FM-Towns version that added voice acting by Richard Garriott and other Origin employees.**

Ultima VI must have come as a shock to *Ultima* fans when it was first released, so wildly did its graphics depart from the design of the first five titles in the series. Gone were the overhead tiles and dual-scale worlds that had been staples of the series; full-colour isometric graphics and a continuous, open world awaited the Avatar.

From the first moments of its introduction, *Ultima VI* marks itself as different. The turn-based combat is the first aspect of the game that players experience, and the initial battle plays out in the middle of Lord British's throne room!

It's a grim picture that is painted as the game opens: Britannia is under attack by a new and terrifying foe. The Gargoyles have marched out of the depths of the world, killed many of the realm's soldiers, and seized the eight Shrines of Virtue. And it's up to you to stop them. *Ultima VI* thus seems to set up a very generic tale about a hero ridding a fantasy realm of an army of monsters. And were this any other game, that might well have been the scope of its story.



"Grasp it as a man of mettle, and it soft as silk remains."

Sherry has gained a level...

and strength!

The Shrines of Virtue allow the Avatar to level up, once they have been liberated; each confers different stat bonuses, based on its respective Virtues

But this is an *Ultima*; *Ultima VI* twists its story around in a brilliant act of narrative subversion. The Gargoyles, we soon learn, have a legitimate grievance against Britannia, one which upends the Avatar's seemingly noble actions in *Ultima IV* and *Ultima V*.

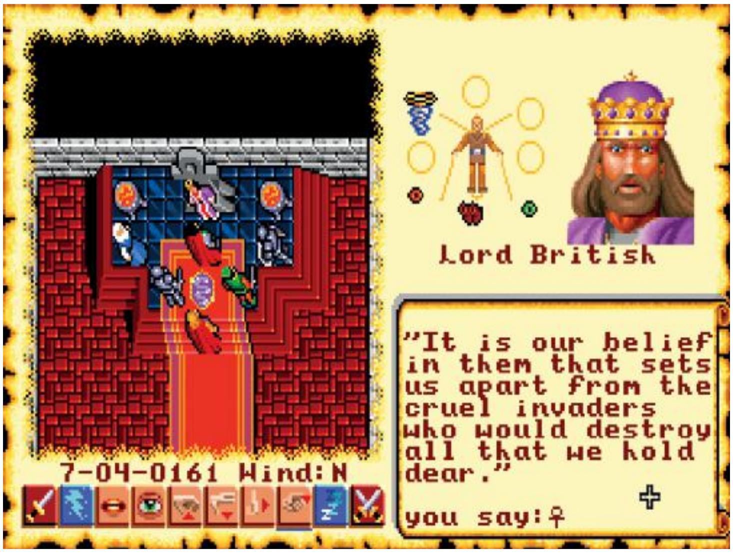
For, as the player will soon learn, the Codex was not Britannia's to claim; it has, in fact, been stolen. And the rescue of Lord British precipitated a horrifying cataclysm that devastated the Gargoyle people and their home. Now, bereft of their holy book and reeling from the destruction of much of their world, they have set out to pay back Britannia in kind for its misdeeds. And it is only by finding a way to reconcile the warring sides that the Avatar can prevail.

In fact, *Ultima VI* gives players the option to almost completely avoid the use of violence. It isn't even necessary to level up to finish the game, and there are only two or three fights that are genuinely unavoidable. (The opening battle, notably, is not one of these.) Clever players can, for the most part, find ways to carry out each piece of the game's plot using non-violent methods, and some parts of the plot can even be skipped entirely.

Not that one can't find combat if one goes looking for it; there are plenty of random encounters scattered across Britannia. *Ultima VI*'s monsters are usually not difficult to best even at lower experience levels, but some of them can be truly devastating in combat. (Battle-hardened Avatars can even test their mettle against the dragons of Destard … if they dare.)

Of course, you don't need to throw yourself out into Britannia alone. The Avatar's companions from previous games can be found all across the land, some of them eager to join you again. New NPCs can also be found, to further fill out the ranks; up to seven party members can be recruited.

> "I began to reach into things like racism, and what I did with *Ultima VI* was I brought in a race of beings that look very demonic: they have horns, they have leathery wings, they have long claws. […] I set you up to assume that they were evil, when in fact they have families and literature and science, and their grief with you is associated with things that the human society has been doing to them over time. In fact, the way to lose the game is to win the battle. The way to win the game is to force peace."
>
> *– Richard Garriott,*
> Ultima VI*'s designer*



Lord British

"It is our belief in them that sets us apart from the cruel invaders who would destroy all that we hold dear."

you say:

Ultima VI is widely regarded as the first *Ultima* to have both a deep narrative and a highly detailed world

The concept of "open-world" gaming is not new; even the first *Ultima* game can be considered "open-world". But *Ultima VI* expanded upon it by doing away with the dual-scale world design that had been a key characteristic of previous *Ultimas* (and, indeed, of most other CRPGs to that point).

Gone were the depictions of cities and towns as single-tile icons on an "overworld" map, which had to be "entered" for the player to be taken to another map full of buildings and NPCs. In *Ultima VI* buildings and NPCs are present alongside mountains and forests – all of Britannia can be explored in one go.

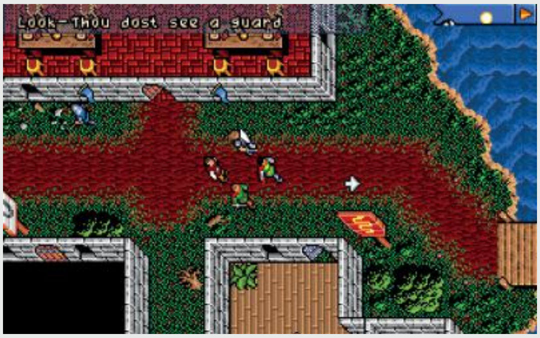
And Britannia itself feels alive. NPCs are fully scheduled; they sleep at night, wake in the morning and sit down to eat, and go about their day tending a shop or wandering about town. They close up shop for the evening, eat dinner, and then return to their beds to rest for another day.

Ultima VI can be different games to different players. It can be approached casually, but offers much for the seasoned CRPG veteran to enjoy as well. It can be completed in under two hours, or explored for months on end. It's a classic title well worth purchasing and exploring. **KE**

Numerous utilities exist to allow players to edit the map, graphics, and dialogue of *Ultima VI*. For more details, go to: www.ultima6.ultimacodex.com.

Nuvie

The New Ultima VI Engine began as an attempt to create an open-source implementation of the *U6* engine that could run natively under modern operating systems. But Nuvie has since grown far beyond Eric Fry's original design and now offers various new features, such as a new UI, dialogue keywords, new graphics and much more.

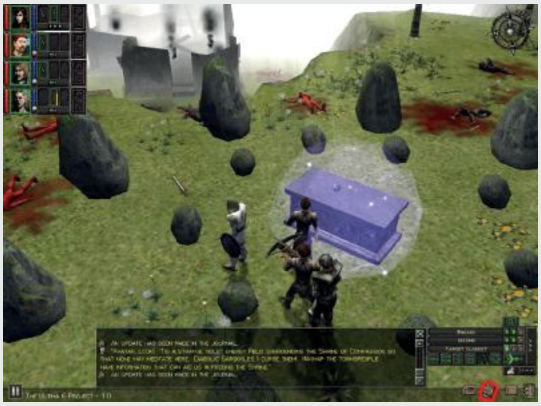


Look-Thou dost see a guard

Nuvie allows you to hide *U6*'s intrusive UI and use new features from *Ultima VII*, such as dialogue keywords

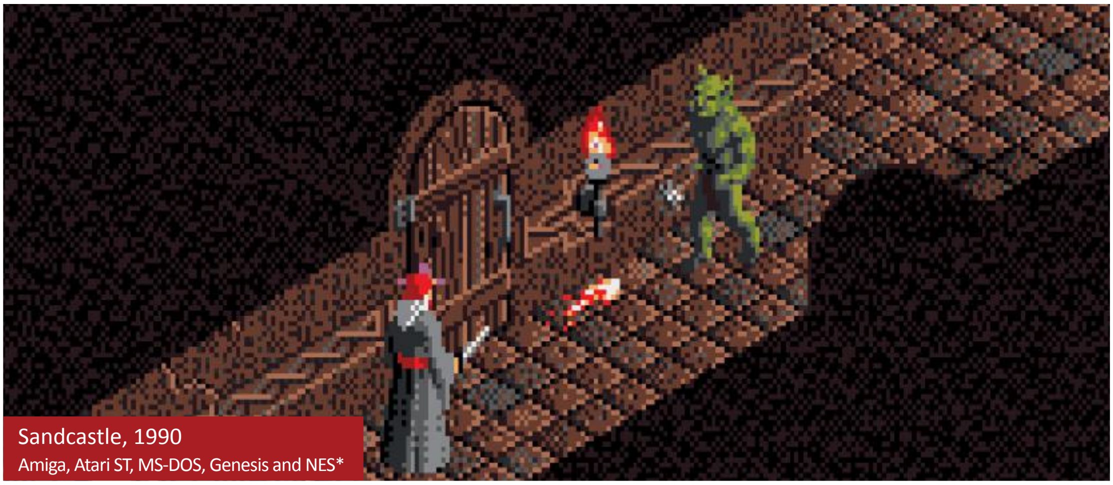
The Ultima 6 Project

Created in partnership with the team behind *Ultima V: Lazarus*, this mod offers a recreation of *Ultima VI* using the *Dungeon Siege* engine. It adds new subplots and side-quests, but it's also more combat-heavy than the original game. Get it here: www.u6project.com



Encounters that could be avoided in *Ultima VI* typically have to be fought out to their bitter end in *U6P*

The Immortal

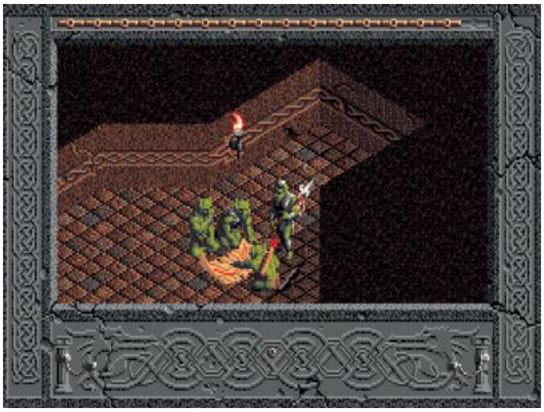


Sandcastle, 1990
Amiga, Atari ST, MS-DOS, Genesis and NES*

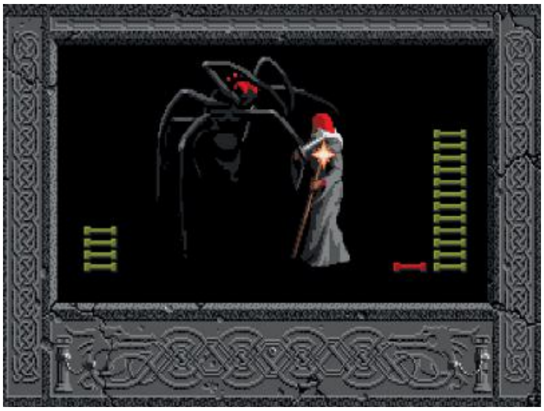
Even for a time when there was much less handholding in games, *The Immortal* stands out as exceptionally unforgiving in the gory and creative ways your character – an old wizard searching for his mentor in a ruined city – can and will die.

A refreshing mix of action, adventure and RPG, the game features real-time fights, puzzles, NPCs, spells and many items – each with a purpose, even if that purpose is to kill you in a gruesome manner.

***Ports of *The Immortal* are very varied, some featuring extra areas and traps. The Apple IIGS is the original, but the Genesis port became famous for adding bloody death animations.**



The wizard drinks a shrinking potion to sneak past the goblins and enter a small crack in the wall



Fights are in real time and very arcade-like; you have two different attacks and can dodge left or right to tire your opponents

The Immortal boasts great graphics for its time, a novel save system for each level making up for the many ways you die, varied environments to explore and a short but surprisingly engaging story told through dream sequences and characters you meet during your travels.

Although the game's manual provides some hints, each level of the carefully handcrafted dungeon involves a lot of trial and error to traverse – one wrong step can mean getting immolated, crushed, drowned, spiked, webbed, swallowed whole by worms or simply attacked with few opportunities to replenish health after a fight. Fights are limited in number however, and thus always feel like a significant accomplishment once you have won or managed to bypass them.

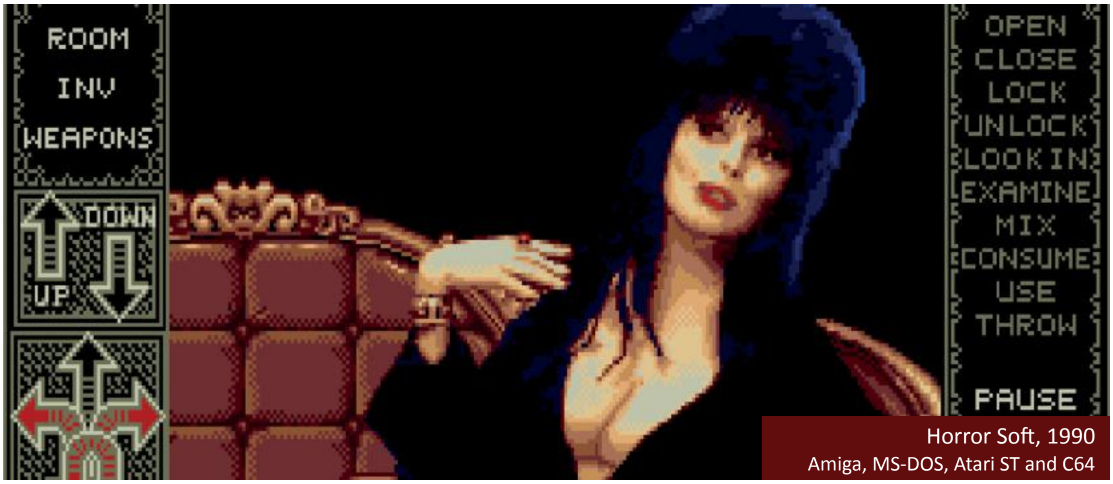
Puzzles are diverse and mostly unique, from reflecting light with a certain item so a hidden exit appears and planting spores that will poison everyone present in a room to avoiding invisible enemies through creative use of a fireball. Though it is mostly linear, the game also incorporates some choice and consequence, with different outcomes depending on whether you choose to kill or aid certain characters.

Although it was not a huge hit in its time, I nevertheless have very fond childhood memories of the game. It had an immersive quality to it that, in my mind, outshines many newer and bigger games.

I fought hard for the rather fragile wizard, *wanting* him to succeed and see what happened next, wanting to know who the elusive girl was and whether there was an actual dragon living down below.

If you can stomach real-time fighting and a few punishingly difficult parts, this is a forgotten gem – one that gives a real sense of accomplishment upon completion, as well as one that entertains, immerses and frustrates until then. **CH**

Elvira: Mistress of the Dark



Horror Soft, 1990
Amiga, MS-DOS, Atari ST and C64

In 1989, British company Horror Soft developed an adventure game called *Personal Nightmare*. The company's logo was accompanied by Elvira, a vampish character played by Cassandra Peterson, who hosted TV reruns of campy horror flicks in the US. Initially just a marketing endorsement, she became the star of her own game, *Elvira: Mistress of the Dark*.

Based very loosely on the 1988 movie of the same name, Elvira has inherited a castle from her uncle, and in the process of cleaning it up, has awakened the forces of evil. The player character, a paranormal investigator, ends up getting trapped in the castle along with Elvira, who doesn't otherwise do much other than mocking the player and occasionally crafting a magic spell. The adventure is spent on a hunt for a way to destroy the witch Emelda so you can both escape.

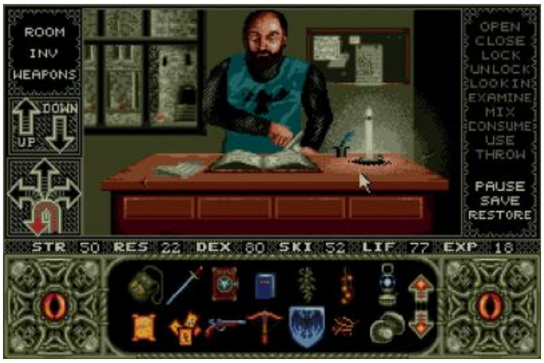
Mistress of the Dark is a blend of traditional point-and-click adventure gaming and stat-focused RPG combat. As you explore the cavernous halls of Killbragant Castle, you'll also regularly stumble onto various foes. Fighting one-on-one against an enormous on-screen enemy, you click on commands for various offensive and defensive manoeuvres. However, don't count on your reflexes saving you, because the fighting is incredibly clumsy, and often a matter of chance more than anything. Stronger equipment and higher stats will theoretically help, but the RPG elements feel like window dressing.

The frustrating combat is only compounded by the pedestrian adventure game design, as navigating the expansive castle is confusing, and you can find yourself in unwinnable situations. Playing it is frustrating; it's the fantastic visuals that are key to the game's appeal – not only Elvira's digitized visage, which looks gorgeous, but also the larger, detailed enemy sprites, as well as the many gory death scenes.

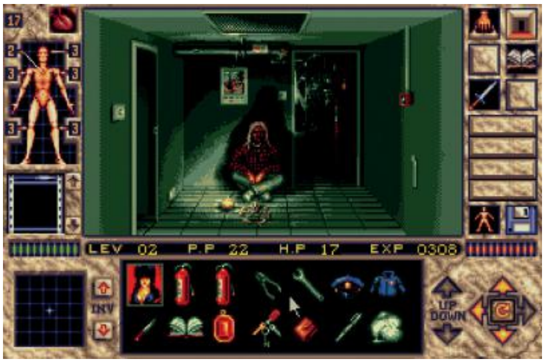
The series continued with *Elvira II: The Jaws of Cerberus* (1991), which moved the setting to a movie studio, where various sets teleport you to different worlds. The locale allows for a wider variety of areas, and makes more thematic sense for Elvira, plus it tightens some of the more frustrating elements of its predecessor and adds in a class system (of sorts).

Elvira was ditched in the spiritual follow-up *Waxworks* (1992), which is conceptually similar, but features wax statue displays instead of movie sets. Afterwards, Horror Soft evolved into Adventure Soft, focusing on its comical *Simon the Sorcerer* series. **KK**

In 2020, a company named WENT2PLAY released *Waxworks: Curse of the Ancestor*, a remake of Horror Soft's 1992 classic.



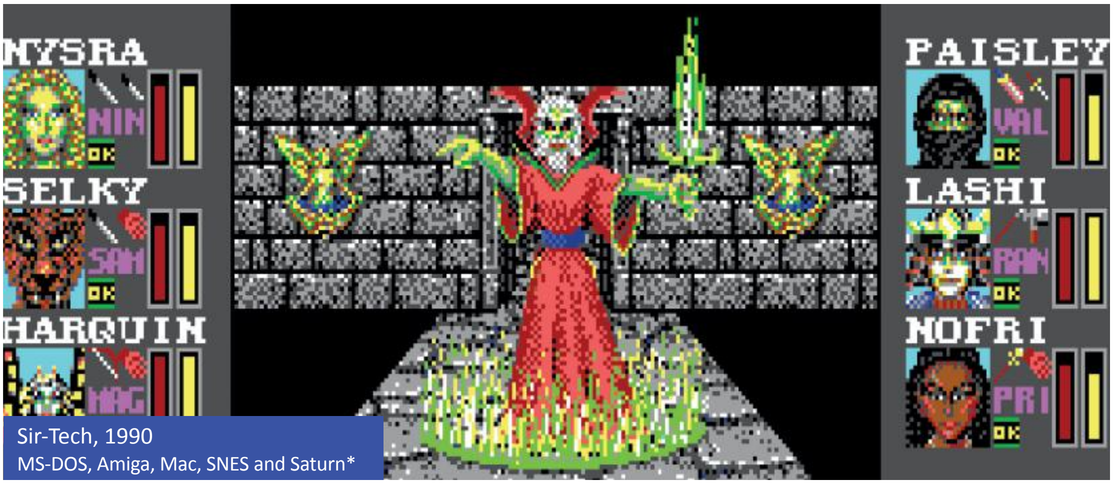
Elvira's castle is explored in first-person view; you must collect items and solve puzzles while battling both in random encounters and against important unique enemies



Elvira II has a more interesting setting and even better visuals that deliver on the horror atmosphere, but still suffers from an underwhelming combat system

Wizardry VI:

Bane of the Cosmic Forge



Sir-Tech, 1990
MS-DOS, Amiga, Mac, SNES and Saturn*

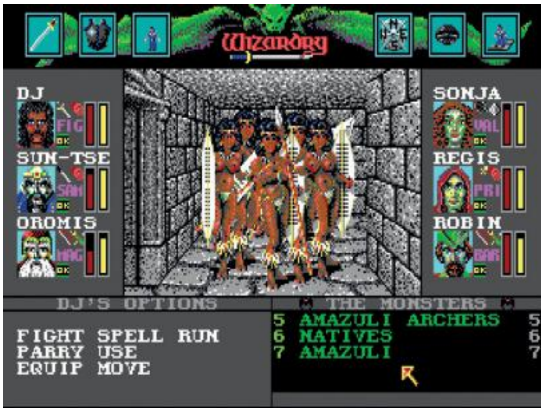
****Wizardry VI* was remade for the SNES and Saturn, sporting much improved graphics and a handy mini-map. Sadly, these versions never left Japan.**

Wizardry VI: Bane of the Cosmic Forge is often overlooked as a stepping stone for the sprawling sequel *Wizardry VII*, yet in my opinion it's the best of the whole series.

There are lots of objective reasons why it's important for the evolution of the series, but for me it conveyed such an incredible sense of place without losing the gamey and addictive maze-ness of previous *Wizardry* entries that it was just hard to put down. I remember mapping the main hub of the game, the entry level of the castle, and suddenly realising that it actually resembled a castle when you looked at the map. At that time that blew my mind more than many of the more far-reaching changes to the mechanics.

That said, *Wizardry VI* marked a major turning point for the series. David Bradley was now the sole designer, and he wasn't afraid to break conventions. Some changes are immediately obvious, such as the new EGA graphics, while others are more subtle.

For example, when you enter the Bane castle for the first time, the gate ominously closes behind you, never to be opened again.



Wizardry VI finally replaced the wire-frame dungeons with colourful, if somewhat limited, EGA graphics: the game only has one tileset, so forests, mines and pyramids all look like stone dungeons

If you didn't play any of the previous games in the series, this detail might not mean much to you. Otherwise you will immediately understand that with one swift move you have been cut off from one of the main support pillars of past games. There is no going back to the city to rest and heal, to identify or buy items, or restore or replace fallen comrades.

Where *Wizardry V* improved on the mechanics of the early *Wizardry* games in small iterative steps, *Wizardry VI* boldly rips out the guts of the series and replaces them to an extent never done before or since. Instead of five races and eight classes, you get 11 races and 14 classes, all with distinct career paths and strengths and weaknesses. The typical fantasy races from previous games remain, but they are joined by new options like humanoid cats, dogs, lizards, dragons and others.

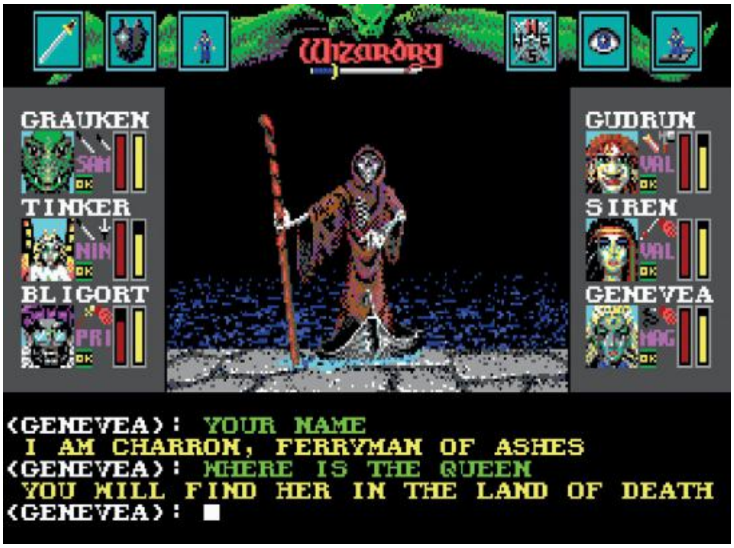
Moreover, an extensive skill system was added, with over 20 skills spread across three categories (Weapons, Physical and Academic), further differentiating the various classes. As with previous games, items are restricted by class and race, with most of the restrictions making at least some sense.

Quantity doesn't always translate into quality but, together with the already existing class-change feature, character development in *Wizardry VI* went into overdrive – seeing your characters go from total pushovers to killing machines is as satisfying as ever.

Magic is another area that was completely overhauled. Spells are now sorted into six schools, including Psionics and Alchemy. The more poetic spell names were replaced by functional ones (e.g. MAHALITO became Fireball), which decreased style but increased usability. More importantly, spells now cost mana and can be cast at six distinct power levels, each increasing the spell's effectiveness and cost.

"Bane was a breakout – it was time to take the next step, time for our adventures to grow up and leave the safety of the nest, it was time that there should be no going back. *Bane* retained the full spirit of traditional *Wizardry*, braving ever deeper into the castle dungeon, but then, what happens?! At the point of climax we reach not the lowest depths, but instead ascend outside the confines of the dungeon prison, freed forever from the shackles of the past, and the end is now the prelude for what is to follow.*"*

– David D. Bradley, Wizardry VI*'s creator*



```
<GENEVEA>: YOUR NAME
 I AM CHARRON, FERRYMAN OF ASHES
<GENEVEA>: WHERE IS THE QUEEN
 YOU WILL FIND HER IN THE LAND OF DEATH
<GENEVEA>: ■
```

NPCs are more complex and play a much greater role than in previous *Wizardry* games; some may even lie to you, and the game offers three different endings based on whom you chose to believe

Another area the game improves upon are locks and traps. *Wizardry VI* introduces separate gameplay for both unlocking doors and opening treasure chests. Usually I hate mini-games in RPGs, as they often feel completely disconnected from the core gameplay of the rest of the game, but I've always loved the various iterations of lock-picking and trap-disarming – starting with *Wizardry VI* – as they felt like such an integral part of the game's world.

It would be easy to go on with a list of all the things Bradley changed with *Wizardry VI* (improved NPC interactions, different attack modes for weapons, increased number of status effects, etc.), but, all boiled down, the changes pushed the series into a new era without sacrificing complexity along the way.

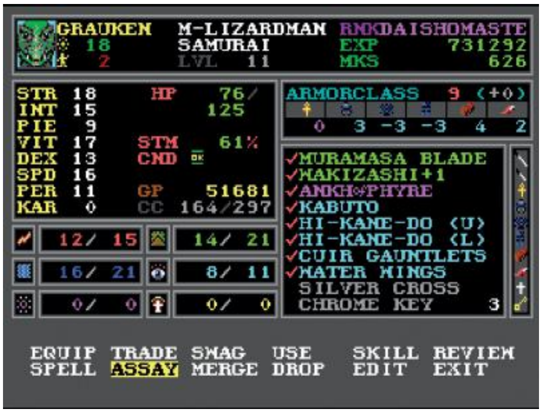
That isn't to say that nothing was lost in the transition. Not everyone enjoyed the verbose NPCs, the ability to rest anywhere and the removal of the "explore dungeon, return to town" gameplay loop.

Japanese developers prefer the old ways, and have polished the gameplay of earlier *Wizardry* entries to perfection, their best "dungeon RPGs" offering the same mechanical depth that *Wizardry VI* introduced. But their worlds remain constrained and limited – as awesome as they are – to abstract mazes.

Wizardry VI, on the other hand, broke free from these constraints, with maps that felt like real places yet are still maze-like enough to provide a challenge. Unlike those of its open-world sequels, *Wizardry VI*'s maps are tightly designed, with many paths between the various areas. Instead of a series of dungeon levels, you really had the feeling of slowly exploring a massive, densely-layered castle and its surroundings.

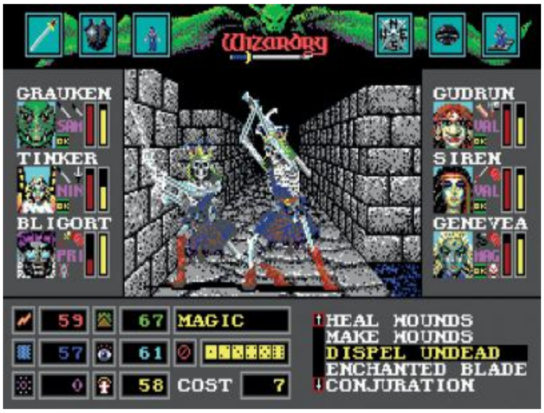
Wizardry VI is much more than a transition piece – it managed to repackage the classic *Wizardry* experience, by pushing forward and yet retaining the elements that have always been most appealing about the series. **JG**

You can use the *Cosmic Forge Editor* to apply bug fixes and patches that alter gameplay mechanics, or to edit many of the game files.



```
GRAUKEN     M-LIZARDMAN  RNKDAISHOMASTE
   18       SAMURAI      EXP     731292
    2       LVL     11   MKS        626

STR 18      HP     76/   ARMORCLASS   9 (+0)
INT 15            125      0   3  -3  -3   4   2
PIE  9
VIT 17      STM    61%
DEX 13      CND  OK      ✓MURAMASA BLADE
SPD 16                   ✓WAKIZASHI+1
PER 11      GP   51681   ✓ANKH OF PHYRE
KAR  0      CC 164/297   ✓KABUTO
                         ✓HI-KANE-DO (U)
  12/ 15       14/ 21    ✓HI-KANE-DO (L)
                         ✓CUIR GAUNTLETS
  16/ 21        8/ 11    ✓WATER WINGS
                          SILVER CROSS
   0/  0        0/  0     CHROME KEY          3

 EQUIP TRADE SWAG  USE   SKILL REVIEW
 SPELL ASSAY MERGE DROP  EDIT  EXIT
```

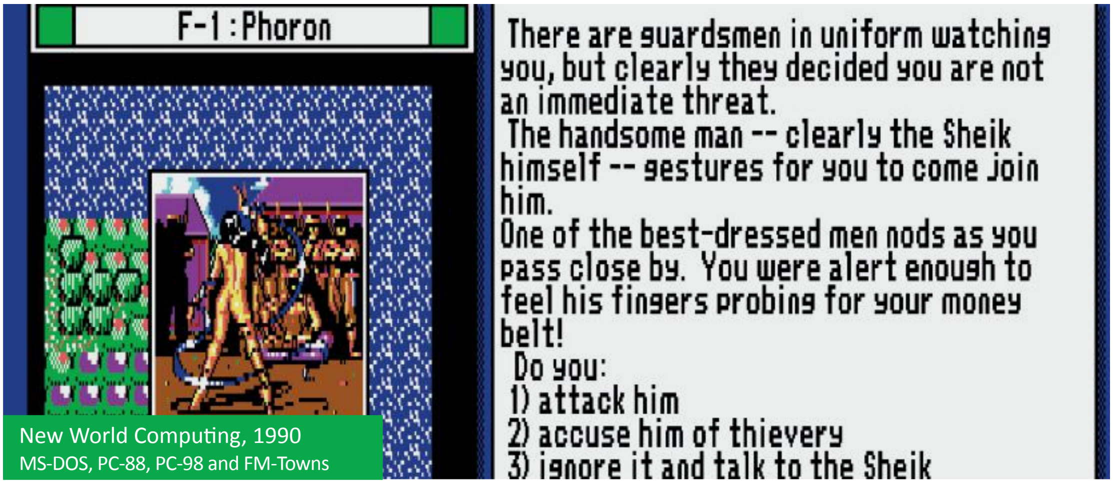
Wizardry VI finally adds mouse support, but its interface is unwieldy and works much better with the keyboard



```
 59   67  MAGIC            HEAL WOUNDS
                           MAKE WOUNDS
 57   61                   DISPEL UNDEAD
                           ENCHANTED BLADE
  0   58  COST    7        CONJURATION
```

Magic plays very differently from previous *Wizardry* games, as spells now cost mana and have multiple power levels

Tunnels & Trolls:
Crusaders of Khazan



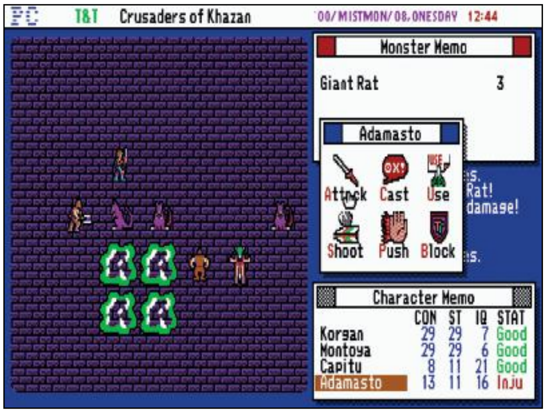
There are guardsmen in uniform watching you, but clearly they decided you are not an immediate threat.
The handsome man -- clearly the Sheik himself -- gestures for you to come join him.
One of the best-dressed men nods as you pass close by. You were alert enough to feel his fingers probing for your money belt!
Do you:
1) attack him
2) accuse him of thievery
3) ignore it and talk to the Sheik

New World Computing, 1990
MS-DOS, PC-88, PC-98 and FM-Towns

Tunnels & Trolls is based on the tabletop RPG of the same name, designed by Ken St. Andre in 1975 as a light-hearted and accessible alternative to the then recently released *Dungeons & Dragons*.

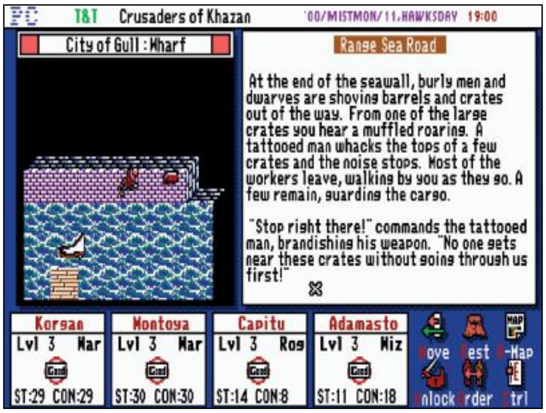
When *Tunnels & Trolls* was released in Japan in 1987, it became extremely popular. And so Starcraft, the company who published the Japanese versions of *Wizardry* and *Might and Magic*, asked New World Computing to co-design a licensed *T&T* CRPG.

***Tunnels & Trolls* was first released in Japan, and then almost entirely re-written by Neal Hallford (writer of *Betrayal at Krondor*) for its English release.**



	CON	ST	IQ	STAT
Korgan	29	29	7	Good
Montoya	29	29	6	Good
Capitu	8	11	21	Good
Adamasto	13	11	16	Inju

Combat is turn-based and can be automatically fought by the AI; while most battles are simple, some are practically unwinnable



At the end of the seawall, burly men and dwarves are shoving barrels and crates out of the way. From one of the large crates you hear a muffled roaring. A tattooed man whacks the tops of a few crates and the noise stops. Most of the workers leave, walking by you as they go. A few remain, guarding the cargo.

"Stop right there!" commands the tattooed man, brandishing his weapon. "No one gets near these crates without going through us first!"

Events are spread all over the maps, but are invisible: you never know when you'll come across a life-and-death choice, so save often!

As such, the game's design was done in the US, then sent to Japan, where it was programmed. This is immediately noticeable in the unusual mouse-driven interface, similar to those of early Japanese graphical operating systems.

Overall, the game plays mostly like an *Ultima* clone, with various cities, a large overworld, turn-based combat and a customisable four-character party. What truly sets it apart is the presence of countless Choose Your Own Adventure-like events, mostly taken directly from *T&T*'s solo adventure game books.

Instead of having interactive NPCs, the game is filled with countless text-heavy encounters and events in which you can pick one of many options, leading to vastly different outcomes – from a nice reward to instant death. Some events even change depending on your race, class, stats and/or known languages.

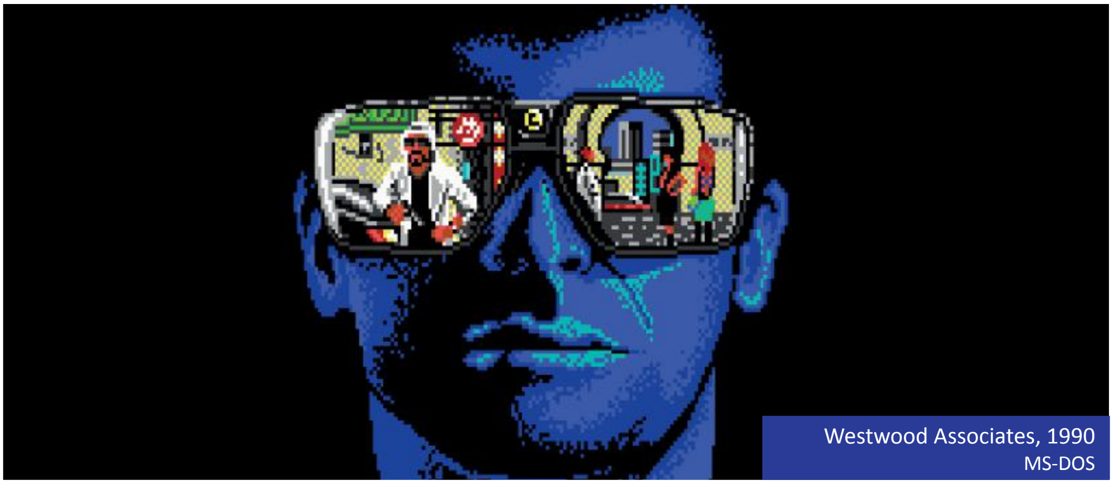
However, while the events are well-written and offer many role-playing opportunities, far too many can wipe your party out. For example, ignoring a castaway's plea for help can lead to an impossible battle against a horde of angry water elementals.

To make matters worse, enemies scale to your level in an unfair way. If there's a dragon blocking your way and you decide to grind a few more levels, chances are next time you'll face three dragons instead.

To survive, you'll have to save after almost every step, because any harmless-looking empty square nearby may actually contain a deadly trap, ambush or event that can take you to the Game Over screen.

It's a shame, but these annoying issues ended up dooming what's otherwise an intriguing game. The excellent CYOA-like events set it apart from any other CRPG of the time (and even of today), but only those willing to endure frustrating difficulty and many, many reloads will get to enjoy them. **FE**

Circuit's Edge



Westwood Associates, 1990
MS-DOS

Circuit's Edge is an interesting adventure/RPG hybrid, based on George Alec Effinger's 1987 book *When Gravity Fails*. It takes place in a dystopic cyberpunk future which, like most of the sort, owes a tremendous debt to William Gibson's *Neuromancer*. The major difference is that instead of the world being overtaken by the Japanese, it's been influenced by Islamic culture.

You control Marîd Audran who, per usual pulp standards, is a down-on-his-luck detective who has resorted to running goods for his pals. During a seemingly innocuous delivery, you find your client dead, presumably murdered. A mafia boss saves you from being arrested, but now you must help him investigate the murder, exploring the seedy underground of a city known only as The Budayeen.

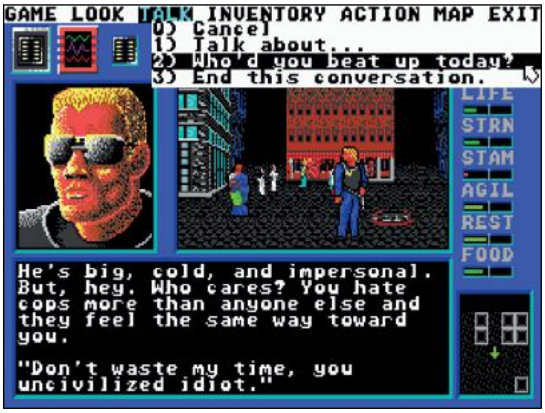
The gameplay leans more towards the RPG end of the spectrum, as real puzzles are sparse and most of the time is simply spent running to different cafés and bars, talking to people, and finding leads. You'll also end up gambling, beating up punks and selling junk to get enough money to buy cybernetic modifications, which can be equipped to improve various skills, such as combat and hacking.

Not all of the events are linear, making it relatively free-form compared to a standard adventure game. The game runs in real time, meaning certain people are at certain places during certain times and it is entirely possible to miss stuff if you take too long.

While the story is standard and the interface is a pain, *Circuit's Edge* really nails the atmosphere. The 16-colour graphics are perfect for depicting the city's grittiness, and the music, while sparse, is appropriately moody. There's quite a bit of nudity, many of the females are "sexchanges", and you can sleep with practically anything, or even light up.

There are over 60 locations in The Budayeen, and you can easily spend the first few hours trawling the bars, trying to pick up hookers, gambling and watching holo peep shows, just taking in the game world. While the interaction is somewhat limited, there's enough depth to the hellhole that is the Budayeen to make the trip worthwhile, even decades later. As a whole, *Circuit's Edge* flounders as an RPG but succeeds as a work of interactive fiction. **KK**

***Circuit's Edge* had the help of *When Gravity Fails* author George Alec Effinger, who claimed to have written "about 75% of everything on screen".**

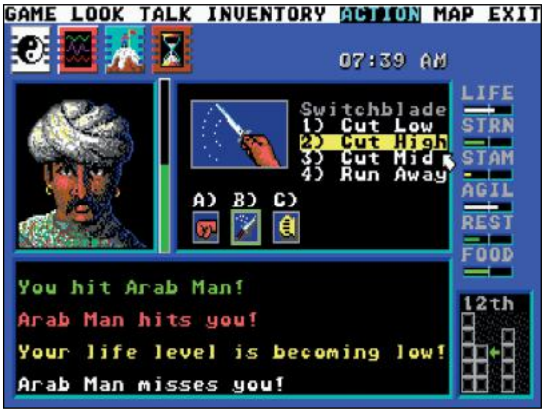


0) Cancel
1) Talk about...
2) Who'd you beat up today?
3) End this conversation.

He's big, cold, and impersonal. But, hey. Who cares? You hate cops more than anyone else and they feel the same way toward you.

"Don't waste my time, you uncivilized idiot."

You explore the city in first-person view, as if in an urban dungeon, using a drop-down menu or typing keywords to interact with items and NPCs



Switchblade
1) Cut Low
2) Cut High
3) Cut Mid
4) Run Away

A) B) C)

You hit Arab Man!
Arab Man hits you!
Your life level is becoming low!
Arab Man misses you!

You can be randomly attacked by muggers, but winning these fights usually just requires that you've installed the proper cybernetic mods

J.R.R. Tolkien's

The Lord of the Rings, Vol. I

Interplay, 1990
MS-DOS and Amiga

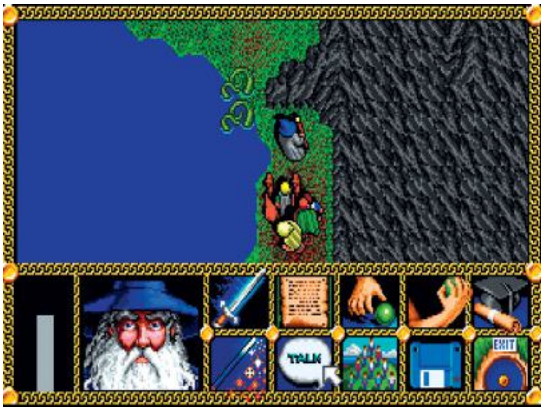
In 1994, Interplay released another game called *J.R.R. Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings Vol. I,* this time for the SNES. Despite having the exact same title, it was an entirely new game, made by a different team.

I remember exactly why I bought *Lord of the Rings Vol. 1*. The box art was cool. The title had quite the catchy name. And since this was the CD-ROM version, it featured lots of animated cutscenes from a movie I had no idea was animated by Ralph Bakshi nor that it was adapted from apparently quite the famous book. I was a 10-year-old kid, OK?

Yet this was a game that changed my life: you can explore a huge game world however you like? And you can do things in the order you want? And there are several solutions to problems, some the developers have not actually thought about?

While mostly forgotten today, *LOTR Vol. 1* has many of the features that defined the great RPGs of its time, presented in a colourful and accessible game that still remains rewarding and highly replayable.

You start alone with a band of three weak hobbits, grow nearly invincible as the full Fellowship is formed, explore dungeons, talk to characters with a system of keywords very much akin to *Ultima*'s, get side-quests, fight in many turn-based battles, and eventually, prevail (at least until the sequel).



While the graphics were good for the time, they lack variety and fail to convey a sense of wonder; this screenshot shows the gates of Moria and its tentacular guardian, but it looks like many other areas

The game uses an overhead view similar to that of *Ultima VI*, with a mouse-driven interface and graphics that are colourful but lack variety. The soundtrack, however, is memorable and features tunes that feel both adventurous and peaceful.

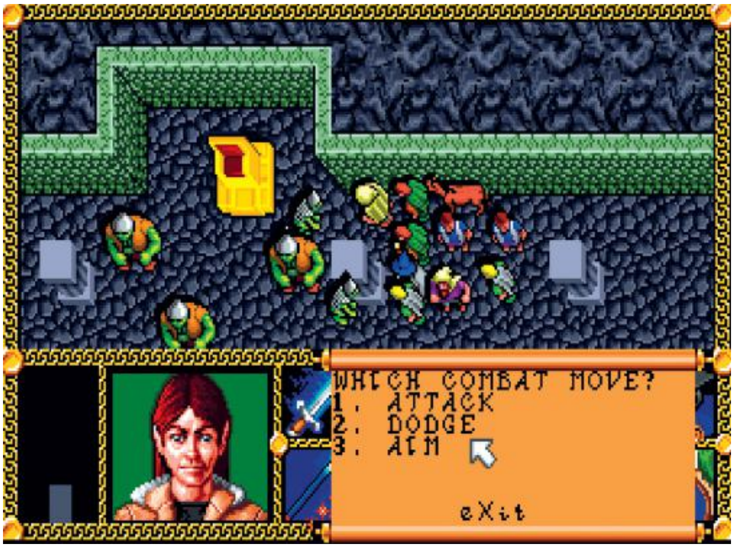
The player controls a large party of up to ten adventurers at once, but there are actually many more characters available to be recruited. There's no character creation, and levelling up is practically meaningless, so customisation comes from selecting the members of your Fellowship and equipping them.

The game world, fully fleshed out from the Shire to Lothlorien, is lengthily described on-screen (or in the game's manual, if you were playing the floppy disk version) – a feature it shares with *Wasteland*, another Interplay game. And not the only one: skills are to be used often outside of combat. Your characters can climb a hill, jump over pits, pick locks, or even use their knowledge to display additional text that gives important clues or just interesting lore.

Readers of *Lord of the Rings* often wished they could explore Middle-Earth at their own pace, and this is a game that pretty much allows this; walking off tracks, entering every house, talking to everyone and inspecting every cranny is the most rewarding aspect of this game. And it is quite a big game.

Combat, on the other hand, is the game's main weakness. It's turn-based, but allows for very few strategies, with the large party being more of a burden than a tactical advantage – the walk order of your party, for example, is of utmost importance to avoid getting strong characters stuck behind weaker ones. Overall, it boils down to having the highest strength and being lucky. Magic is scarce and used mostly for puzzle-solving, but it's disappointing that not even enemy spellcasters will use magic against you.

> "I had obsessed over the books when I was little, had the calendar and everything. And inside the front cover of *The Fellowship of the Ring* was a computer program I'd written down by hand when I was in seventh grade. I brought it to them [the Tolkien Estate] and showed them: 'This was my first computer program, written inside the cover of this book.' I don't know if that's what got them to agree, but they did. I think they knew they were dealing with people who were passionate about the licence."
>
> *– Brian Fargo,*
> Interplay*'s founder*



Combat is turn-based and very simple; the most important thing is the marching order of your party, as characters need to get close to attack and might get stuck behind weaker party members

Lord of the Rings, Vol. 1 had another controversial feature. Anyone who read the book will be confused at seeing references to Sharkey quite early in the game, at meeting the wizard Radagast in such circumstances, and even being able to recruit another very special character so early in the story.

This is because *LOTR Vol. 1* doesn't follow the plot of the novel entirely. It says this straight away in the manual: "The reason we did this was not to 'improve' Tolkien's work, but to challenge the computer gamer who is familiar with Tolkien's work. Expect to be surprised."

As such, there are many plot elements, quests, and even main story events that didn't appear in the books. A huge betrayal and blasphemy to some, a fair bit of fresh air to others – especially as it allowed for events and quests to have multiple solutions.

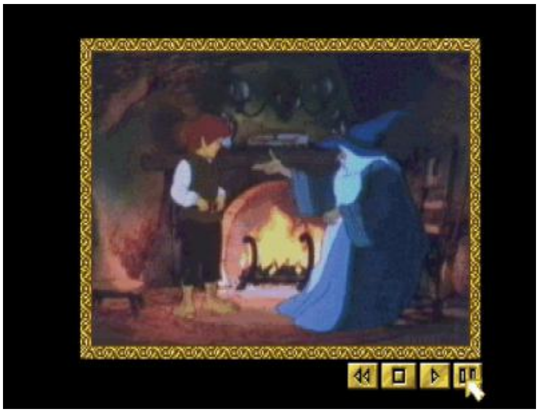
The game also played fast and loose with its cast, as you can "win" even if characters like Frodo, Gimli, Legolas and Aragorn are dead or were never recruited.

Despite this, some moments in the game can be confusing if the player isn't familiar with the books. There are no hints on how to deal with the Balrog in Moria, for example. It's also easy to miss important events and characters, as some of them will only appear if you walk over the exact tile that triggers them.

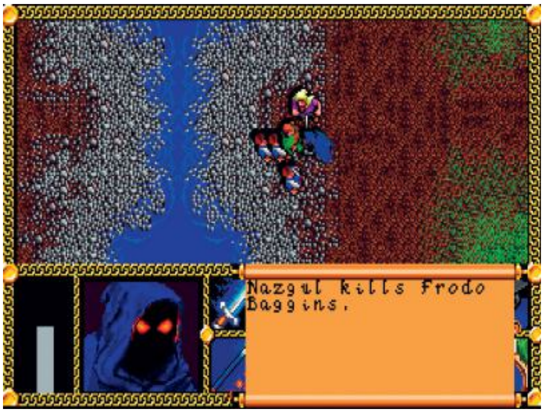
The game was followed by a *Volume 2* in 1992, based on *The Two Towers*. The engine and gameplay were mostly similar, but one could tell the developers were struggling with source material featuring vast, open fields and a less than linear story. The sequel erratically moved you from one party to the other and featured rather dull environments. And how to show the massive Helm's Deep battle with 1990 technology?

Volume 3 was never made; poor sales sealed its fate. It could be just as well, as *Return of the King*'s story is hardly fit for this kind of game. Thus ends this first attempt at a *Lord of the Rings* CRPG; not a major title, but a small curiosity that can be easily enjoyed. **MI**

***The game was re-released for CD-ROM in 1992, adding an automap, an extended soundtrack and scenes from Ralph Bakshi's *Lord of the Rings* movie, also removing the need to look up paragraphs in the manual.**



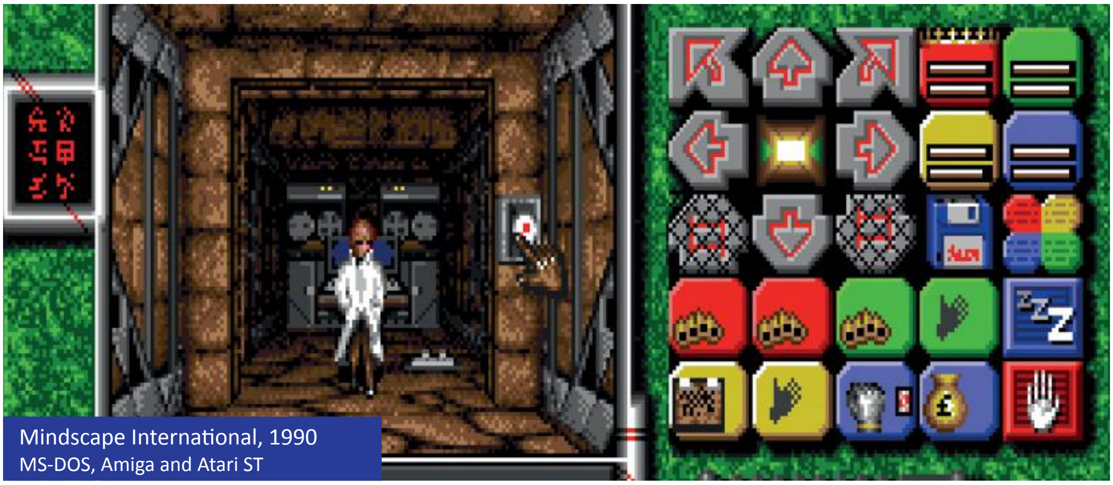
The CD-ROM version replaced its cutscenes with clips from the 1978 *Lord of the Rings* movie directed by Ralph Bakshi



Nazgul kills Frodo Baggins.

There's a great degree of narrative freedom; events have multiple paths and you can win without key characters

Captive

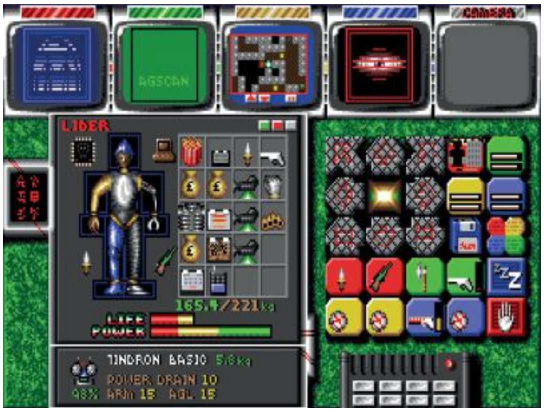


Mindscape International, 1990
MS-DOS, Amiga and Atari ST

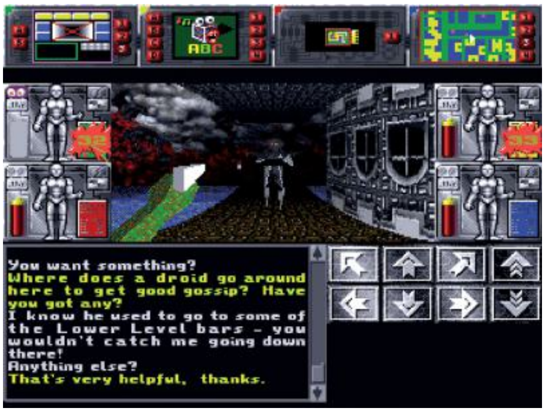
Captive is a real-time sci-fi blobber, in which your character wakes up imprisoned in an unknown place. Your only hope is to remotely control four droids, who must find and liberate you.

The droids are highly customisable, as they have detachable individual parts (hands, arms, legs, feet, chest and head), each with its own stats, energy cost and utility. For example, a droid with a damaged head will display distorted graphics to the player.

The Ultimate Captive Guide is an excellent fan-site entirely dedicated to *Captive*, filled with trivia, useful tools, tips and stats.



You can replace the droids' parts, upgrade your equipment and install shields, scanners, mini-maps and other useful features directly in the UI



You want something?
Where does a droid go around here to get good gossip? Have you got any?
I know he used to go to some of the Lower Level bars - you wouldn't catch me going down there!
Anything else?
That's very helpful, thanks.

Captive 2 is a very exotic and ambitious game, with a massive scope and some very unusual design choices

Captive relies heavily on procedural generation. When you start the game, you first have to fly with a spaceship to one of the planets on your star map, land, locate an enemy base, enter, locate a space probe inside the base, destroy the generators and then run like hell. If you don't manage to get out in time, you'll die when the base explodes. The goal of the game is to do this ten more times, allowing you to free yourself.

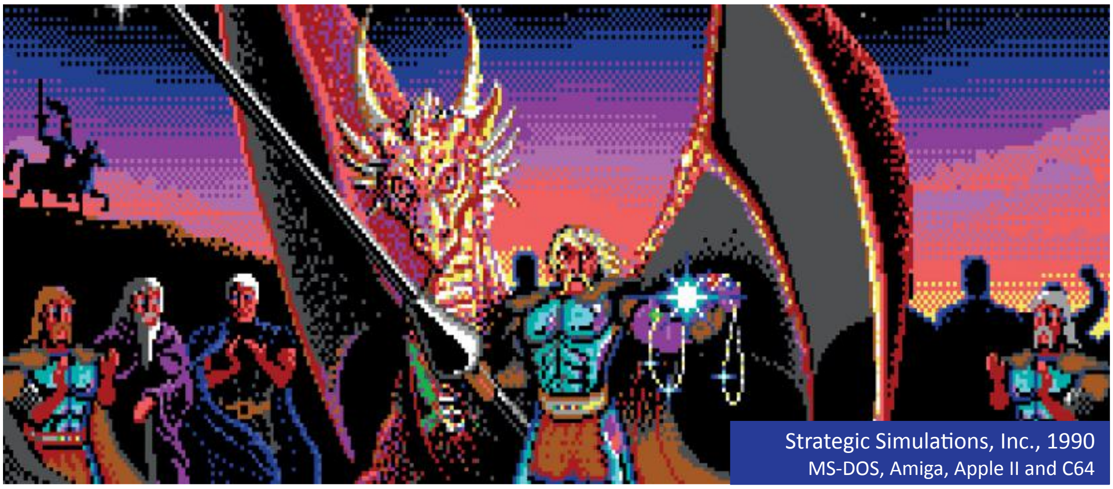
If you succeed, you get the chance to start over again, and again and again. Hundreds of bases with countless procedurally-generated levels, all sprung from the same seed to make sure every player sees the same sets of levels. This is both the game's greatest strength and its main weakness. Once you understand how the game constructs levels and even puzzles, you'll realise just how bare-bones and repetitive it is.

Playing *Captive* as a kid, that didn't bother me. What kept me going was seeing something new every base. New monsters, different tile graphics, more weapons, body parts and ingenious tech upgrades. That first run with 11 bases is quite fun and has enough to offer to overcome the simplistic gameplay. But after that it gets tedious.

The sequel, *Liberation: Captive 2* (1994), was truly ambitious. Once again in charge of the four droids, you have to investigate a murder cover-up in a futuristic, hostile city. The city is massive – a sprawling open world with shops, libraries, offices, houses, etc. The game also featured fully 3D graphics, a customisable UI and it introduced the ability to talk to NPCs, pursuing more peaceful approaches.

Still, just as with the first game, most of it was procedurally generated and, combined with the insanely large city, made for a game easy to admire for its ambition but hard to finish due to sheer size and lack of compelling, handcrafted content. **JG**

Champions of Krynn


Strategic Simulations, Inc., 1990
MS-DOS, Amiga, Apple II and C64

Champions of Krynn is the first entry in the second of SSI's "Gold Box" series, this time in the then-popular Dragonlance setting. I bought it when I was 14 years old, attracted by the box art and the back-of-the-box description. I had only just discovered Tolkien and entered my first fantasy phase, I guess. ("It's not a phase, mum!")

When I bought the game, I had never played *D&D* and I didn't really know what it was. I thought it was something very American, probably expensive, and surely I wouldn't find anyone to play it with anyway. (I did have *Hero Quest* and it was already tough finding friends who wanted to play that.) A computer game was the ideal solution to my fantasy role-playing needs.

The manual first describes how to play the game, then explains the A*D&D* rules (often in great detail), followed by several journal-like entries to which the game refers once in a while in order to advance the story. It was all quite overwhelming. Just by reading these, I understood that *Krynn* was something real, complex and detailed. I knew it was made for me.

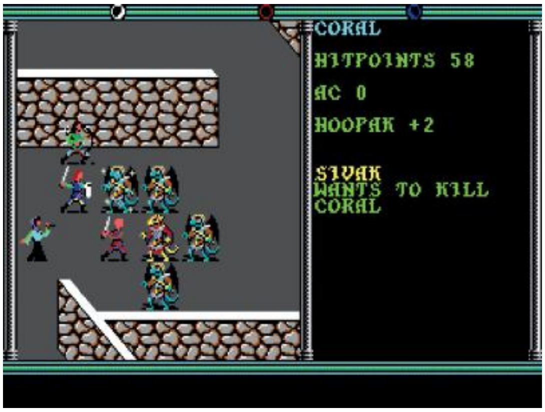
I think you remember your first computer RPG because it draws you in. You are absorbed by it and you care about your characters so much, you dream about them. In hindsight, the story wasn't exactly the strong point of the *Krynn* series, but the stories you come up with yourself, these live forever.

Now that I know Dragonlance, I appreciate the attention to detail. How a lot of iconic characters make appearances in these games. How magical items are rare and mages aren't trusted. How they made the gods, and even the three moons and their cycles a gameplay feature, boosting certain magic depending on their phase. How you could create a Kender or a Solamnic Knight, and how there were already quests that only a certain class could solve.

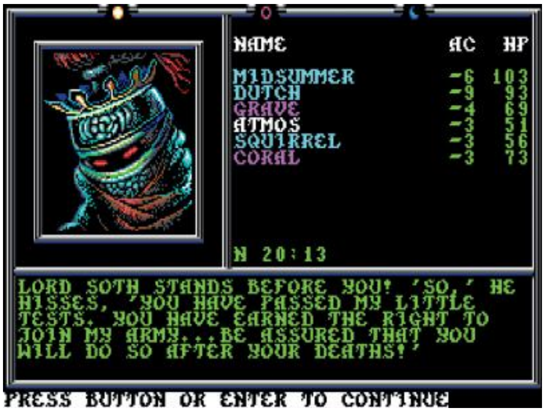
A lot later, when I traded my Commodore 64 for a PC, I could finally play the rest of this epic trilogy: *Death Knights of Krynn*, released in 1991, and *Dark Queen of Krynn* (1992). And so I restarted *Champions* (probably for the fifth time), in order to import my party into the sequels. And even though I was almost 10 years older, and it was the ugliest game at that time, it was still my favourite RPG.

Now I'm almost 30 years older, and it still is. **DW**

The Dragonlance setting by Tracy & Laura Hickman grew extremely popular in the '90s, with a dedicated *D&D* line and a shared universe spanning more than 190 novels.

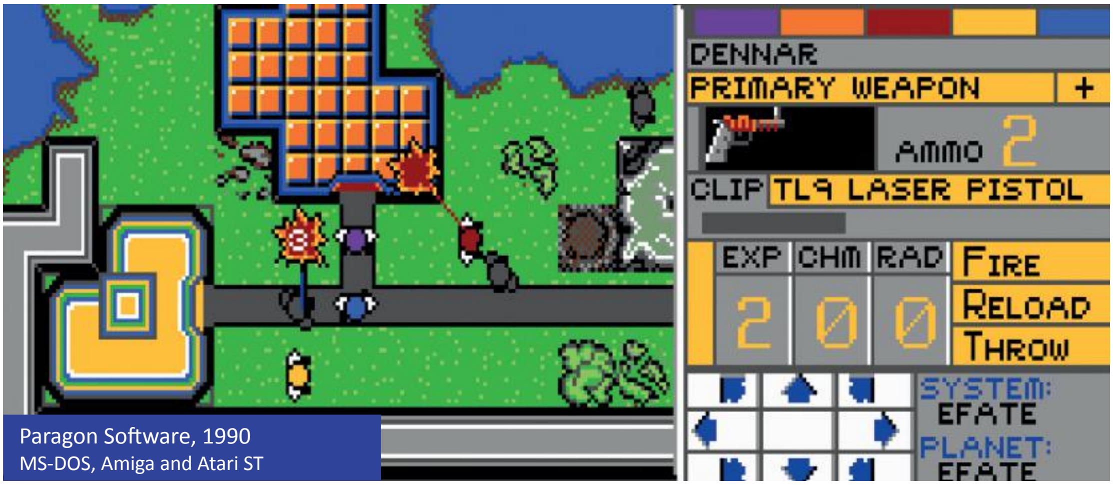

```
CORAL

HITPOINTS 58

AC 0

HOOPAK +2

SIVAK
WANTS TO KILL
CORAL
```

The Gold Box games are known for their challenging tactical combat, and *Krynn* adds new threats like Draconians that explode after being killed


```
NAME                AC  HP

MIDSUMMER           -6 103
DUTCH               -9  93
GRAVE               -4  69
ATMOS               -3  51
SQUIRREL            -3  56
CORAL               -3  73

N 20:13

LORD SOTH STANDS BEFORE YOU! 'SO,' HE
HISSES, 'YOU HAVE PASSED MY LITTLE
TESTS. YOU HAVE EARNED THE RIGHT TO
JOIN MY ARMY...BE ASSURED THAT YOU
WILL DO SO AFTER YOUR DEATHS!'
PRESS BUTTON OR ENTER TO CONTINUE
```

The *Krynn* series is filled with iconic characters and set pieces from the books, such as Death Knights, flying islands and dragon battles, remaining a fan favourite

MegaTraveller:
The Zhodani Conspiracy



Paragon Software, 1990
MS-DOS, Amiga and Atari ST

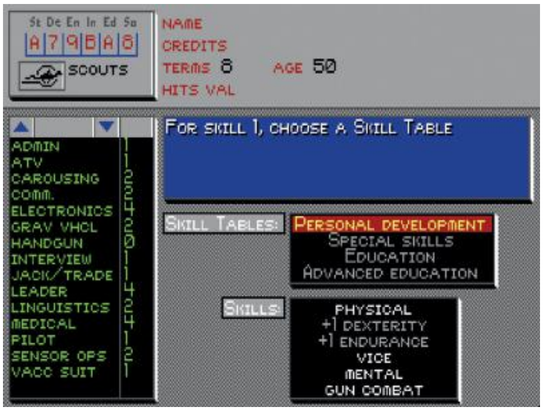
The *Traveller* tabletop RPG was first published in 1977 and became quite popular in the ’80s. It had several versions, like *MegaTraveller*, *T4*, *T5*, *Mongoose* and adaptations for *Hero System*, *GURPS* and d20.

Based on the *MegaTraveller* pen-and-paper RPG, *The Zhodani Conspiracy* has one of the most complex rulesets in any videogame. Unfortunately, complexity does not equal quality, and much of the game is overshadowed by pointless rules, a clichéd plot, and a combat system that turns duels with laser rifles into a chore – a sin for any sci-fi game.

Upon starting the game (and passing the multiple-choice copy protection test), players have the option of creating five characters from scratch or quick-starting with a pre-generated party.

MegaTraveller offered one of the most extensive character generation processes ever made. Hours can be spent here. After rolling (and most likely re-rolling) your attributes, your character can attempt to sign up for one of the five major services (Marines, Army, Navy, Merchant, and Scout), or enter the draft.

Signing up for a branch is by no means assured: the Marines, for example, are quite difficult to enter and, even if you’re successfully accepted, there’s no guarantee that you won’t be pulling kitchen duty and peeling potatoes for a term – literally.



St	De	En	In	Ed	So
A	7	9	B	A	8

SCOUTS

NAME
CREDITS
TERMS 8 AGE 50
HITS VAL

ADMIN	1
ATV	1
CAROUSING	2
COMM.	2
ELECTRONICS	4
GRAV VHCL	2
HANDGUN	0
INTERVIEW	1
JACK/TRADE	1
LEADER	4
LINGUISTICS	2
MEDICAL	4
PILOT	1
SENSOR OPS	2
VACC SUIT	1

FOR SKILL 1, CHOOSE A SKILL TABLE

SKILL TABLES:
PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT
SPECIAL SKILLS
EDUCATION
ADVANCED EDUCATION

SKILLS:
PHYSICAL
+1 DEXTERITY
+1 ENDURANCE
VICE
MENTAL
GUN COMBAT

Character creation is faithful to the *MegaTraveller* tabletop ruleset and almost a game by itself; you can even die of injuries! It would later by mimicked by *System Shock 2*.

Each term you’ll learn new skills but, instead of manually selecting them, you choose a category and the game randomly assigns you one of its skills, e.g., Personal Development might give you Physical, +1 Dexterity, Vice, Hand Combat or Blade Combat. Yet some of these can still have sub-options! For example, Vice can have you learning Bribery, Forgery and other types of skulduggery.

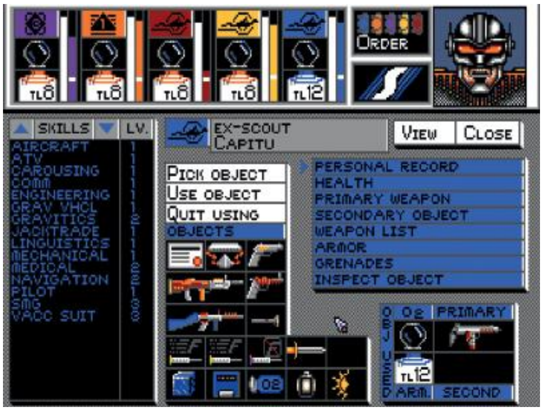
After each term, you can choose to re-enlist or retire and become a mercenary. The longer you serve, the better trained your character, but serve too long and your stats begin to decrease due to old age – you might be expelled, or even have an accident and die during character creation! Once you retire, you get one random benefit for each term served – bonus attributes, weapons, armour or simply some cash.

With your party finished, a mysterious woman barges into a bar and hires you to deliver a disk with information that can end the ongoing war. You then leave the bar and get ambushed, starting under enemy fire with no time to prepare or learn the controls.

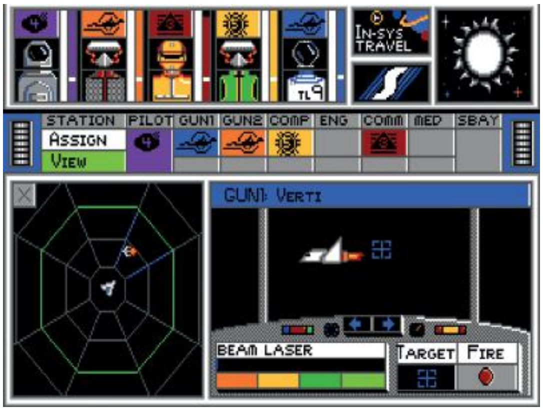
To make matters worse, the combat is atrocious. Battles play in real-time, but the interface is slow and only one character can be controlled at a time. This means your party will stand still while you awkwardly try to order one character to fire at the enemies.

This was such an issue that Paragon Software made a patch for the game, changing the combat to allow players to pause and issue orders. Still, battles remain the worst part of the game – there are no tactics or useful feedback; you just shoot until someone dies. Moreover, hearing about a patch in the pre-Internet era was a challenge, so many players never saw the fixes.

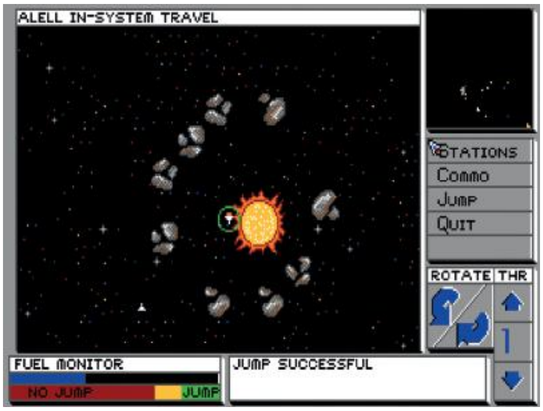
If you manage to survive – or flee – the ambush, the game finally starts properly and you’re free to explore the planet’s tiny city in a top-down view.


ORDER
TL8
TL12
SKILLS
LV.
AIRCRAFT
ATV
CAROUSING
COMM
ENGINEERING
GRAV VHCL
GRAVITICS
JACKTRADE
LINGUISTICS
MECHANICAL
MEDICAL
NAVIGATION
PILOT
SMG
VACC SUIT
EX-SCOUT
CAPITU
VIEW
CLOSE
PICK OBJECT
USE OBJECT
QUIT USING
OBJECTS
PERSONAL RECORD
HEALTH
PRIMARY WEAPON
SECONDARY OBJECT
WEAPON LIST
ARMOR
GRENADES
INSPECT OBJECT
O2
PRIMARY
SECOND
OBJ USE
ARM.

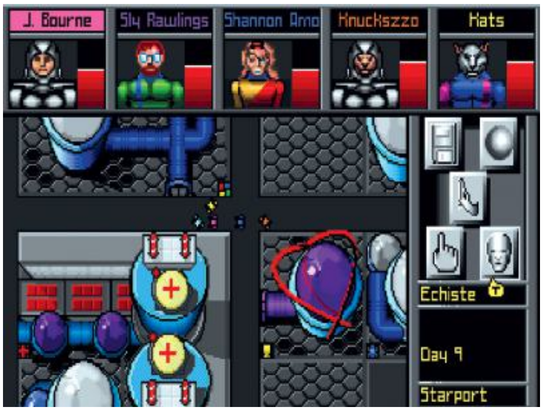
Walking out of the starport without using a vacuum suit is a recipe for instant death on planets with no oxygen


IN-SYS TRAVEL
TL9
STATION
PILOT
GUN1
GUN2
COMP
ENG
COMM
MED
SBAY
ASSIGN
VIEW
GUN1: VERTI
BEAM LASER
TARGET
FIRE

Your ship has eight stations that must be manned; during combat, for example, you need someone firing the guns


ALELL IN-SYSTEM TRAVEL
STATIONS
COMMO
JUMP
QUIT
ROTATE
THR
FUEL MONITOR
NO JUMP
JUMP
JUMP SUCCESSFUL

Spaceflight was originally too hard, with variables like gravitational fields, and was patched to be more arcade-y


J. Bourne
Sly Rawlings
Shannon Amo
Knuckszzo
Hats
Echiste
Day 9
Starport

The sequel expands upon the first game, but doesn't fix glaring flaws like the terrible combat and useless skills

MegaTraveller's main quest is really just an excuse to gather money to upgrade your characters and ship for the endgame. In this regard, the game can be overwhelming, as every aspect is filled with options. Shops are packed with several types of weapon, armour, item and upgrade. You can enter buildings and talk to a few NPCs (though they won't say much), rent one of three unique vehicles to explore the planet's surface or just travel to other planets and systems.

The spaceport allows you to board your ship, or buy a new one. Also available are computer programs that increase your chance of evading attacks or allow you to jump between solar systems – yes, not only does your ship need to have a Jump Drive to travel, but it also needs the software to operate it! The computers themselves can also be upgraded to allow for more programs to run simultaneously.

The spaceport also allows you to buy and sell commodities. Different planets have different prices, so it's possible to start by playing as a trader. Another valid option is attacking other spaceships, destroying them and tractor-beaming their cargo.

Where *MegaTraveller* falls flat is that most of this is wasted. The game's quests, battles and exploration are bare-bones, with nothing that justifies having all these systems; e.g. why have over 30 weapon types but only a few enemies that all behave the same way?

The game bolsters 85 skills, but the manual itself states that 25 are useless, left there for those who wish to use their characters to play the pen-and-paper version of *MegaTraveller*. Still, the remaining 57 skills are just as meaningless and can be mostly ignored.

The sequel, *MegaTraveller 2: Quest for the Ancients* (1991), features a non-linear story that's slightly better, but still has terrible combat and doubles down on the pointless complexity – now there are 125 skills!

In the end, enjoying the *MegaTraveller* CRPGs is all about the illusion – if you ignore (or don't realise) how pointless its systems are, you can dive into them and create your own enjoyment – trading, pirating, learning which weapons can be legally carried in each city, managing air tanks while exploring toxic atmospheres, etc. Whether they are meaningful or not, few games offer so many systems to play with. **FE**

The Zhodani Conspiracy **had an unusually high number of patches for a 1990 title. First they added a pause feature to combat, and a second patch improved the interface and the space controls. These changes were included in the Amiga and Atari ST ports.**

Spirit of Excalibur

Synergistic Software, 1990
MS-DOS, Amiga, Apple IIGS, Atari ST and Mac

In *Spirit of Excalibur* you play as the mythical Knights of the Round Table, in a time after Arthur's death when the realm is in turmoil and needs saving.

Harking back to a time when developers often mixed and matched genres, the game contains a bit of everything – exploration, strategy, adventure and RPG elements. You control armies in (simple) tactical battles, and direct your multiple parties of knights around the campaign map in search of clues, quests and items you need to overcome obstacles. On the way you will meet many colourful characters to interact with, trading with some, getting information from others, helping the local populace and working to create alliances and get new knights to join up.

All this is done within a narrative divided into several episodes, each containing an overarching objective, new NPCs and armies on the map and several side-quests you can choose to engage in or not.

The number of knights you can move out into the world, saving damsels and slaying dragons, is limited at first, but as you conquer territory and solve quests, more and more knights and parts of Britain join you, giving you more manpower and leading to your ultimate goal of reuniting the land.

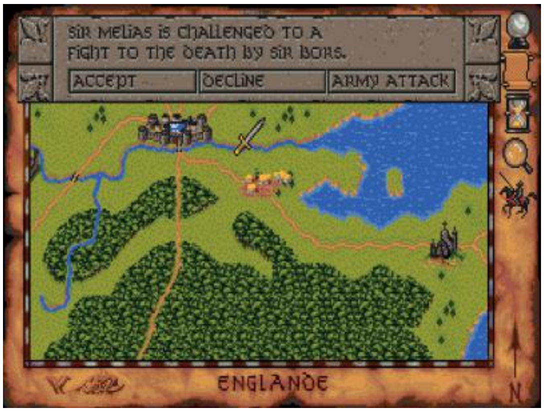
Some knights have old rivalries and should be kept apart, others are of questionable moral fibre and may join the enemy, and mostly you'll come to rely on only a few key knights, sorcerers and monks. Some will have an army under their command, which you'll need to counter Saxon armies and robbers on the campaign map, but most knights you'll employ in RPG fashion, facing opponents in single combat, supported by magic, potions and other helpful items.

Spirit of Excalibur is divided into five parts, each containing a challenge to the realm that must be dealt with – in many cases swiftly and under severe opposition. Navigating through this in the most effective manner requires a lot of experimentation and a lot of restarts for each chapter. This is part of both the charm and the frustration of the game – it will make you work for its perfect ending and you will feel quite some sense of accomplishment if you ever get to it.

Battles are relatively few in number, and many can be avoided. A nice touch is that you can mix and match multiple parties, directing each of them around the map as you please, completing multiple objectives such as countering enemy armies in several places at once or having quicker knights scout ahead, buying things from peddlers and gathering information, while your best party focuses on the storyline.

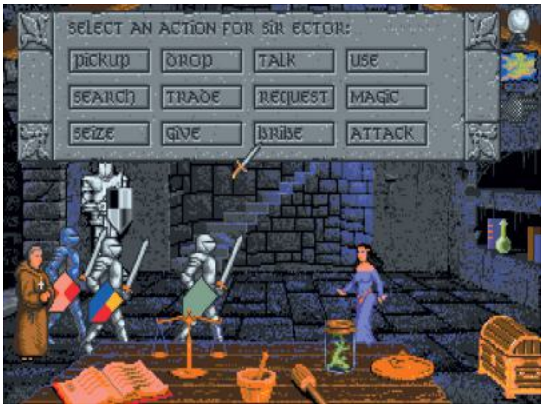
I remember originally filing the game under 'adventure', because while it has progressing stats and several ways to solve (some) situations, at its heart, the game is about exploration, puzzle-solving and above all, even for its time, trial and error. In its hardest parts you will be under time constraints and need to do everything just right.

In 1989 Synergistic Software released *J.R.R. Tolkien's War in Middle Earth*, a smaller game but similar to *Spirit of Excalibur*, set in Middle Earth and focused on large-scale battles.



Sir Melias is challenged to a fight to the death by Sir Bors.

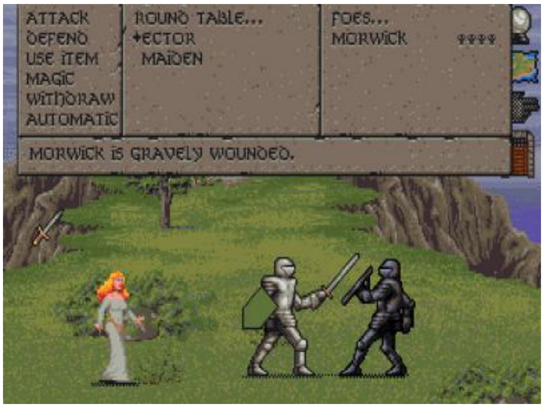
You can send multiple parties to explore the world and choose how to react to the various events and challenges they come across



SELECT AN ACTION FOR SIR ECTOR:

PICKUP
DROP
TALK
USE
SEARCH
TRADE
REQUEST
MAGIC
SEIZE
GIVE
BRIBE
ATTACK

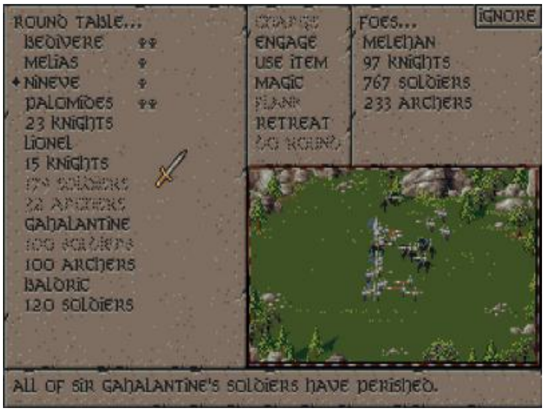
As in adventure games, you can explore locations and use a list of verbs to interact with characters and items



ATTACK
DEFEND
USE ITEM
MAGIC
WITHDRAW
AUTOMATIC
ROUND TABLE...
✦ECTOR
MAIDEN
FOES...
MORWICK

MORWICK IS GRAVELY WOUNDED.

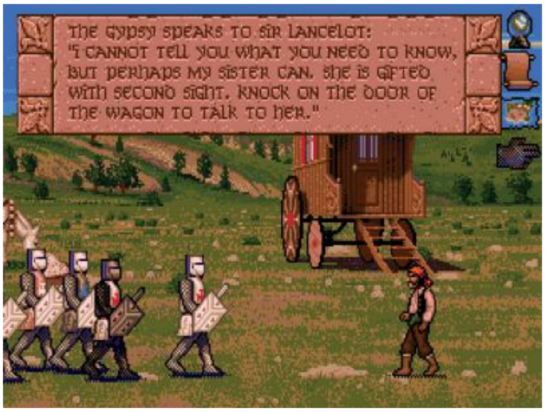
Sir Ector duels Morwick to rescue a maiden; combat is real-time and mostly automatic, but you can give orders



ROUND TABLE...
BEDIVERE
MELIAS
✦NINEVE
PALOMIDES
23 KNIGHTS
LIONEL
15 KNIGHTS
GAHALANTINE
100 ARCHERS
BALORIC
120 SOLDIERS
ENGAGE
USE ITEM
MAGIC
RETREAT
FOES...
MELEHAN
97 KNIGHTS
767 SOLDIERS
233 ARCHERS
IGNORE

ALL OF SIR GAHALANTINE'S SOLDIERS HAVE PERISHED.

During army battles you can order individual troops to perform tactical actions or use special items and spells



THE GYPSY SPEAKS TO SIR LANCELOT:
"I CANNOT TELL YOU WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW, BUT PERHAPS MY SISTER CAN. SHE IS GIFTED WITH SECOND SIGHT. KNOCK ON THE DOOR OF THE WAGON TO TALK TO HER."

Vengeance of Excalibur sends your knights to Spain, where they'll meet Gypsies, Basques, Saracens and even Djinns

Losing certain characters or using key items before their 'right' time might get you through one episode, but make the game unsolvable because you needed those characters/items later. Needless to say, maintaining a save from both start and end of each episode is recommended.

While the game has a problematic interface, horrid pathfinding and at times frustrating gameplay, I nonetheless remember my elation at finally 'solving' it, figuring out the puzzles and completing battles with strong knights equipped with the right items. The story is well-done, the world was beautiful for its time and the exploration, the curiosity to see what the next sleepy hamlet or gloomy ruin held, was captivating.

The sequel, *Vengeance of Excalibur* (1991) largely reuses the same engine and gameplay mechanics as *Spirit*. It moves the action to Spain, as a band of knights chase after a traitor who stole the artefacts of the realm. The game has improved path-finding and a better interface, making it potentially less frustrating, as well as markedly easier gameplay due to more linearity in the story and less trial and error.

Locales are evocative, however, and the game retains the attractions of its predecessor, as you explore and fight your way across a detailed and changing map, though you only control four knights and hardly need to split your party this time around. One new and welcome feature of the sequel is the ability to import your knights from *Spirit*, complete with gear and stats.

In summary, *Vengeance* is a smoother, more streamlined and linear experience, with a completely fresh setting, retaining most of what was good about *Spirit,* although failing to evoke quite the same level of fondness. Still, if you like the first, you will like the second as well – it is a charming game in its own right and certainly more forgiving than its elder brother.

Both games are quite forgotten now, but I see them as rough gems with lots of enjoyment to be had for the right aficionado looking for both challenge and atmosphere. As a child I stayed up many long nights playing, admiring the graphics and making up Arthurian lore of my own – as such, this series definitely sparked my imagination and still shines clearly in my memory decades later. **CH**

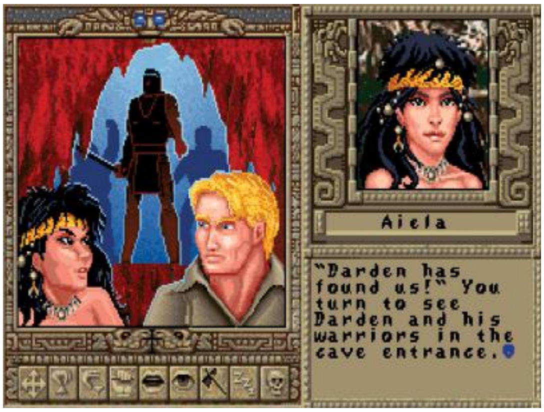
Worlds of Ultima:
The Savage Empire

Origin Systems, 1990
MS-DOS, Mac and SNES

The game's manual was stylised as a '50s pulp magazine, covering plot, items, tribes and enemies, as well as a fake expedition by the developers.

After developing an expensive 16-bit engine for *Ultima VI,* Origin decided to use this new engine to produce a series of smaller-scale *Ultima* spin-offs, titled *Worlds of Ultima.*

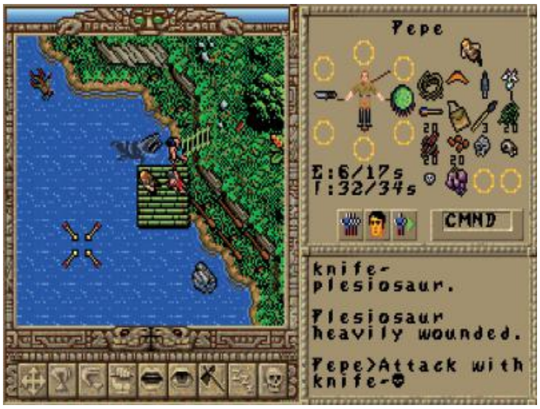
The Savage Empire was the first of said series, sending the Avatar to the Lost Valley of Eodon, a *Land of the Lost*-like world populated by primitive tribes and prehistoric dinosaurs, heavily inspired by pulp magazines and the Allan Quatermain novels.



Aiela

"Darden has found us!" You turn to see Darden and his warriors in the cave entrance.

Savage Empire features cut-scenes at key moments of the game, moving beyond the usual beginning and ending cinematics



Pepe

E:6/17s
I:32/34s

CMND

knife-plesiosaur.

Plesiosaur heavily wounded.

Pepe>Attack with knife-

Getting around the huge valley can be tricky, as you'll have to pack food, fend off dinosaurs and navigate a maze-like landscape

The valley's numerous tribes all resemble various different ethnic groups from Earth's past, including stereotypical African, Polynesian, Neanderthal and Asian cultures. Along with these human tribes and the aforementioned dinosaurs, *The Savage Empire* also features more fantastical creatures, such as a lizard-like tribe, Aztec automatons and evil giant ant-people called Myrmidex – the game's main antagonists.

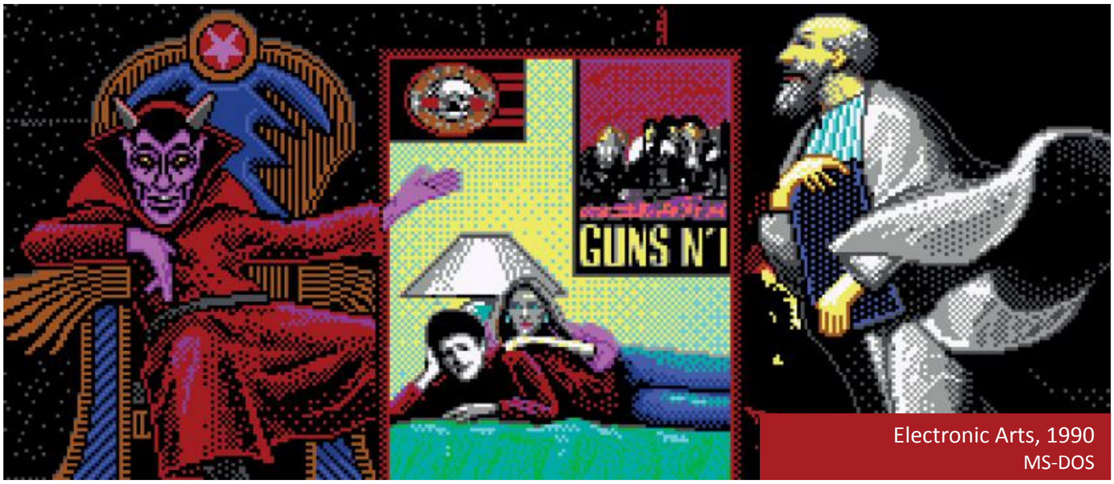
Your goal as the Avatar is to bring all the different warring tribes together to defeat the Myrmidex and bring peace to Eodon. In typical *Ultima* fashion, each tribe expects you to accomplish some tasks before they will pledge their support. These tasks range from rescuing a chief's daughter and blocking a lava flow to drugging a T-Rex and hanging a bell on its neck.

The gameplay is very similar to that of *Ultima VI* – those familiar with it will feel right at home with the clunky UI, turn-based combat system and day-night NPC schedules. The new crafting system is robust, allowing you to skin animals, use ovens to bake clay pots and even grind sulphur, charcoal and potassium nitrate to make gunpowder. Another big difference is the magic system: the Avatar must make spirit offerings to cast any of a rather limited number of spells (only nine in total).

In *The Savage Empire*, the Avatar won't meet his traditional companions from the main *Ultima* series, like Iolo, Dupre or Shamino. However, he'll be joined by rather familiar-looking natives who just happen to closely resemble his friends, such as Triolo, Dokray and Shamuru. He can also choose between romancing the brave warrior Aiela or her adopted sister, Tristia – the first interaction of this kind in a CRPG.

While *Savage Empire* is much smaller in scope than the main *Ultima* games, it still manages to retain the exploration, quest structure and semi-open world aspects of *Ultima VI,* offering a solid experience. **M2**

Escape from Hell



Electronic Arts, 1990
MS-DOS

Your girlfriend has disappeared, along with your best friend? Your life has gone to Hell? A lot of us have been there, I am sure, but Richard Seaborne's *Escape from Hell* takes those moments literally, turning them into a unique RPG premise – a cross between Dante's *Inferno* and *Bill & Ted's Bogus Journey*.

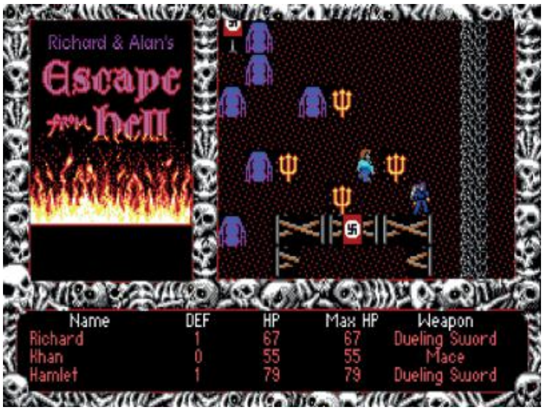
You are Richard, and due to a powerful magic incantation, or perhaps for your unexplained sins, you suddenly find yourself alive in Hell. Your girlfriend and your best friend are somewhere around, too, so you need to find them – and escape. Not without taking revenge on Satan for playing such a trick on you first, though. Which means it is time to grab an anti-tank rifle, team up with Stalin and Hamlet, and show Satan what you are made of, the way RPG heroes do!

Exploring Hell's wasted landscape and banding together with (in)famous historical and literary individuals is, in fact, what *Escape from Hell* is all about. Indeed, seeing as the game's difficulty is fairly low, the main challenge lies precisely in deciding who will join or leave Richard's side. Mechanically, *Escape from Hell* is a simpler version of *Wasteland*: a top-down, turn-based RPG, with stats, skills (mostly combat-oriented, but sometimes not), and first-person fights featuring animated enemy portraits.

As with many older CRPGs, *Escape from Hell*'s tone can get really wacky. (Remember *Might and Magic*'s roasted peasants or *Wasteland*'s bunny master?) It stays tongue-in-cheek throughout and never gives a damn about setting consistency. If that sounds fun to you, you will enjoy the game's humorous design and often clever writing, and the way it makes themes of Hell's bureaucracy and dynamics of power, among other things. It's the kind of off-the-rails creativity that, in these days of post-Kickstarter nostalgia and the AAA RPG crisis, the genre seems to sorely lack.

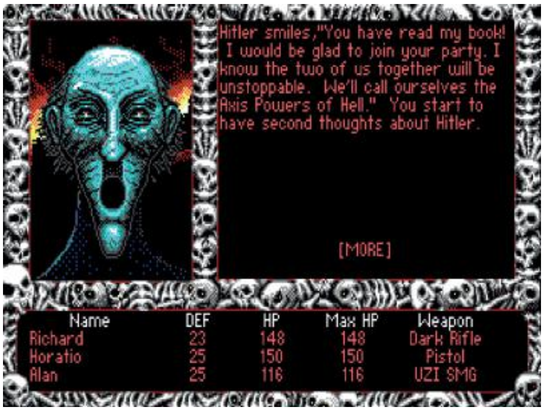
Sadly, due to EA's all-too-familiar shenanigans, the game was downscaled and rushed out. Alternative endings, six further circles of Hell, a lot of individual quest chains and an alignment system all had to be cut. That often leads to loose ends, and ultimately prevents it from reaching true RPG greatness. And yet, even in the state that it shipped in, *Escape from Hell* remains an unorthodox and one-of-a-kind RPG, bound to remain in your memory long after you have beaten it. **CB**

You can read an extensive interview with the game's developer at the RPG Codex.



Name	DEF	HP	Max HP	Weapon
Richard	1	67	67	Dueling Sword
Khan	0	55	55	Mace
Hamlet	1	79	79	Dueling Sword

One of the game's unique mechanics involves using golden tridents to alter the environment or even travel in time, helping to compensate for the game's small world and to present new challenges



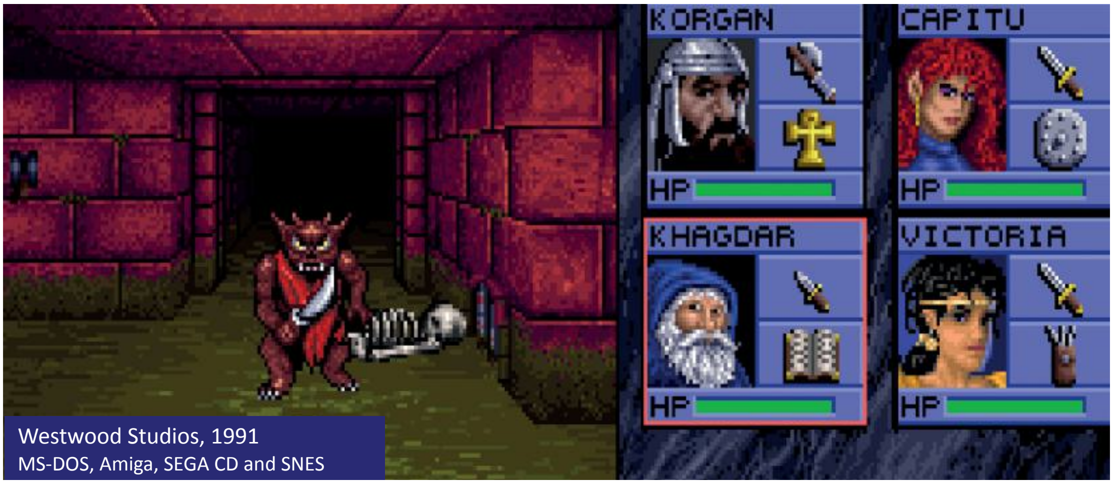
Hitler smiles,"You have read my book! I would be glad to join your party. I know the two of us together will be unstoppable. We'll call ourselves the Axis Powers of Hell." You start to have second thoughts about Hitler.

[MORE]

Name	DEF	HP	Max HP	Weapon
Richard	23	148	148	Dark Rifle
Horatio	25	150	150	Pistol
Alan	25	116	116	UZI SMG

Being set in Hell, the game offers an unusual variety of recruitable NPCs, such as Dante, Stalin, Genghis Khan, Hamlet, Spartacus, Juliet and Mozart, among other real and fictional characters

Eye of the Beholder



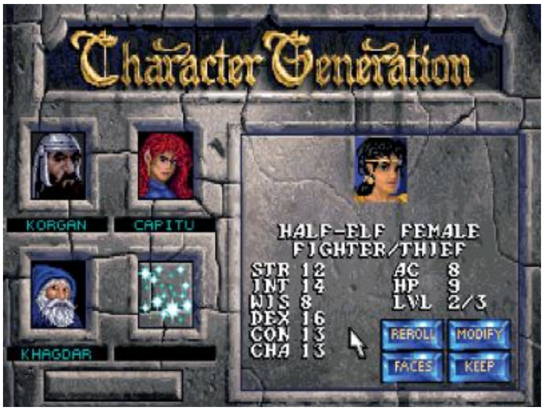
Westwood Studios, 1991
MS-DOS, Amiga, SEGA CD and SNES

Eye of the Beholder was a point-of-no-return for me when it came to RPGs – it looked like a deep and complex game with stunning visuals and a gripping atmosphere. I had never heard of *Dungeons & Dragons* before this, and in hindsight *Eye of the Beholder* served as a wonderful entry point into that realm, not to mention other games like it.

The intro blew me away as it laid down the plot: a party of adventurers is sent to look for an evil presence within the city of Waterdeep, and told to start in the sewers. The game mesmerised me so much that I didn't stop to ask, "Wait, sewers?" but was instead eager to start my adventure and see where it would take me.

Eye of the Beholder's character creation appeared both simple and complex at the same time, but it wasn't until much later that I realised why that was: the developers decided to use the *AD&D* rules only as a guideline, instead of wrapping the game in them. Turns out that half of the main stats are useless and many smaller rules are either ignored or hidden from the player.

If you're having difficulties, *The All-Seeing Eye* is an automapper for the first two *Eye of the Beholder* games, also providing some cheats and a character editor.



HALF-ELF FEMALE
FIGHTER/THIEF
STR 12
INT 14
WIS 8
DEX 16
CON 13
CHA 13
AC 8
HP 9
LVL 2/3

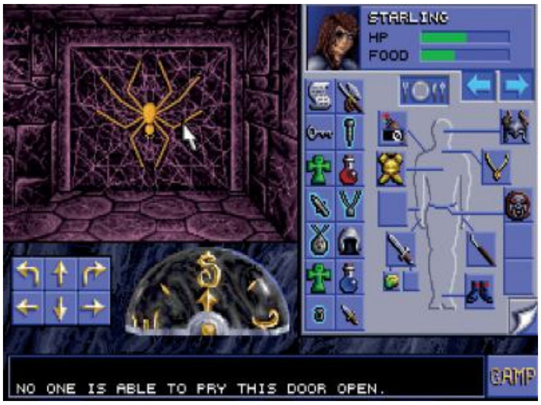
The character system is presented as a full *AD&D* adaptation, but some stats and even classes are borderline useless

Looking back on that, I can imagine that hardcore roleplayers would be miffed, but for a newcomer like myself it was perfect. I did as the manual suggested and created a mixed party of four characters that could deal with whatever dangers lay ahead, knowing that I could recruit two NPCs in-game if something went wrong.

Once the game starts it doesn't take long to get immersed in the game's atmosphere. Bare bones lie piled up in the corner and glowing eyes stare at me from a sewer grate. No music is played beyond the title screen, which left me only with environmental sounds to break the silence. After checking my gear and opening a rusty door I stood face-to-face with my first monster, a small kobold with a vicious glint in his eyes. I was familiar with games telling me in plain text what monsters I had run into, but here I saw first-hand that I was facing one murderous kobold, and that I had to act fast to deal with him; the game is real-time, after all.

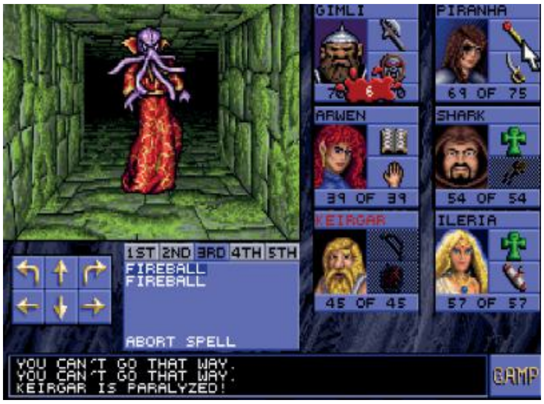
The game's design firmly suggests that players figure things out for themselves. Except for a crude map of the starting levels, a compass in the UI and a few vague clues gleaned from the (mostly useless) manual, I was utterly on my own and trapped in a sewer. Even when I accidentally discovered that the game has hidden Special Quests, I was mostly clueless as to how I had found them. Not that I cared; I was having too much fun exploring.

At first I thought my party would never meet anyone to talk to, but I was quickly proven wrong after I cleared the sewers. NPC interactions are just walls of exposition text, but sometimes I was given a choice, like slaying an injured dwarf or sparing the Drow leader's life … not that any choices mattered in the long run.


STARLING
HP
FOOD
CAMP

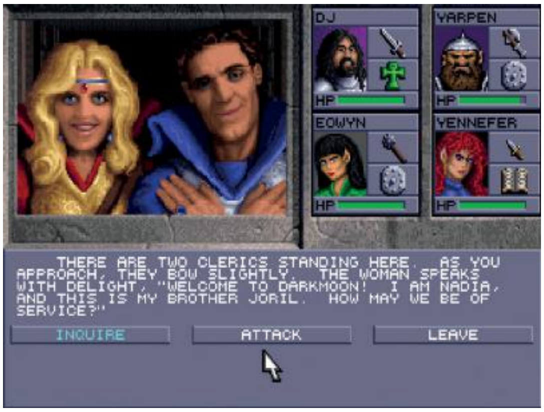
NO ONE IS ABLE TO PRY THIS DOOR OPEN.

The various plot-locked doors and undetectable traps make the Thief class almost useless


GIMLI
PIRANHA
69 OF 75
ARWEN
SHARK
39 OF 39
54 OF 54
KEIRGAR
ILERIA
45 OF 45
57 OF 57
1ST 2ND 3RD 4TH 5TH
FIREBALL
FIREBALL
ABORT SPELL
CAMP

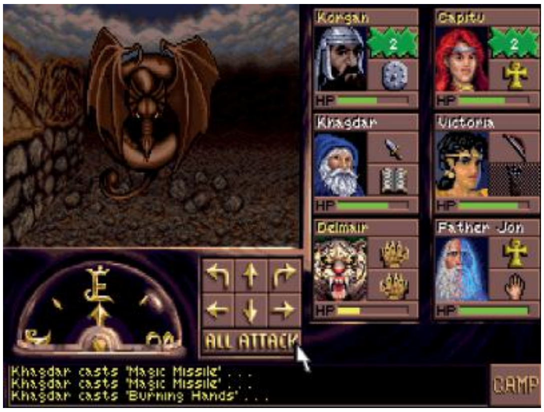
YOU CAN'T GO THAT WAY.
YOU CAN'T GO THAT WAY.
KEIRGAR IS PARALYZED!

Combat is real-time, inspired by *Dungeon Master*, but magic follows the *AD&D* rules and must be prepared


DJ
VARPEN
HP
EOWYN
YENNEFER
HP
INQUIRE
ATTACK
LEAVE

THERE ARE TWO CLERICS STANDING HERE. AS YOU APPROACH, THEY BOW SLIGHTLY. THE WOMAN SPEAKS WITH DELIGHT, "WELCOME TO DARKMOON! I AM NADIA, AND THIS IS MY BROTHER JORIL. HOW MAY WE BE OF SERVICE?"

Eye of the Beholder 2 was an improvement in every regard, including its copious high-quality NPC artwork


Korgan
Capitu
Khasdar
Victoria
Delmair
Father Jon
HP
ALL ATTACK
CAMP

Khasdar casts 'Magic Missile' . . .
Khasdar casts 'Magic Missile' . . .
Khasdar casts 'Burning Hands' . . .

Not even the large outdoor areas and fancy monsters could save *EotB3* from being the weakest in the trilogy

Death was never far away, and while characters could be raised from the dead, there were few opportunities for it. The early monsters didn't pose much of a threat, but then I stumbled upon spiders that wiped out my party several times due to their poison. And that was just the start of my adventure …

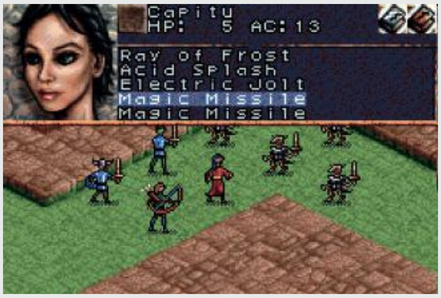
Around the time I first played *EotB*, the sequel *Eye of the Beholder 2: Legend of Darkmoon* (1991) was already out. The sequel improved on the original in every way, and I could even import my *EotB1* party to *EotB2*! What joy I felt!

When *Eye of the Beholder 3: Assault on Myth Drannor* was released in 1993, I snapped it up immediately, hoping for an epic conclusion to my adventures. What I got was a game that lacked the magic touch of its prequels. Turns out that the developer had parted ways with the publisher, which then had to finish the game in-house in a hurry.

The result was a game more in tune with the *AD&D* rules, but not in a good way. Despite the poor third entry, the *Eye of the Beholder* series still stands tall, even after all these years. **ÁV**

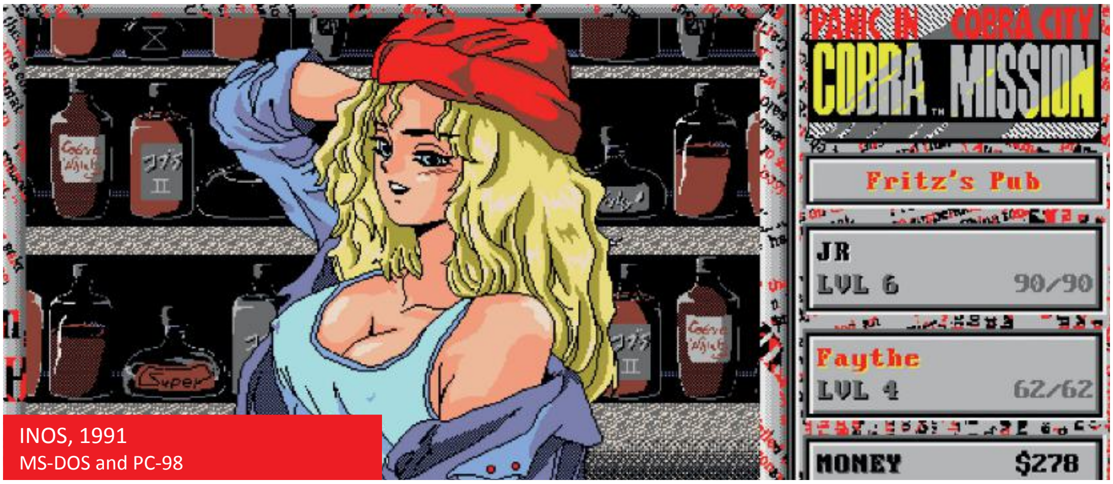
Ports & Remakes

Eye of the Beholder's success resulted in faithful conversions to the SNES and the SEGA CD in 1994 that added a new soundtrack by famous composer Yuzo Koshiro. Curiously, a new remake for the Game Boy Advance was made in 2002. This remake made various changes, such as employing the *D&D 3rd Edition* rules, adding non-combat skills like Bluff and Intimidate, and even using a new isometric tactical combat system, similar to that of the Gold Box games. Unfortunately, the slow combat and awkward interface don't fit well, resulting in a mediocre game.


Capitu
HP: 5 AC: 13
Ray of Frost
Acid Splash
Electric Jolt
Magic Missile
Magic Missile

Cobra Mission:

Panic in Cobra City

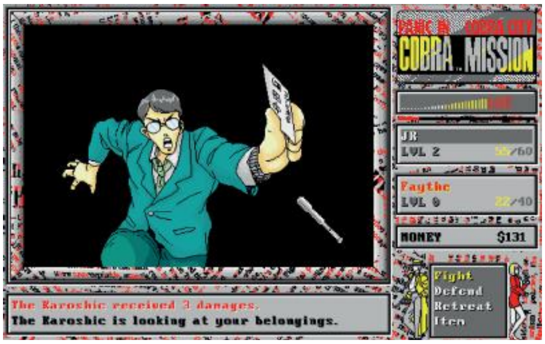


INOS, 1991
MS-DOS and PC-98

***Cobra Mission* was released in Japan in 1991, then localised into English by Megatech Software in 1992.**

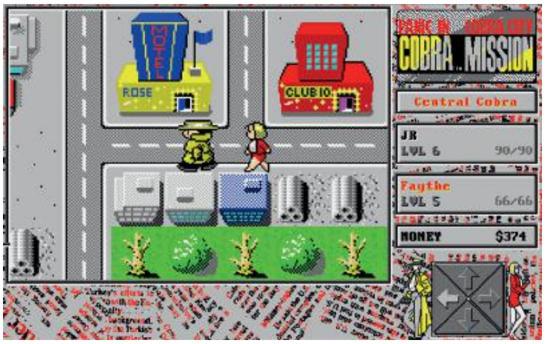
Erotic Japanese RPGs date back to the early ’80s, before even *Dragon Quest* and *Final Fantasy* existed. Titles such as 団地妻の誘惑 (roughly “Housewife Temptation”) had players be salesmen, visiting apartment blocks, fighting gangsters and trying to “score” with the ladies, way back in 1983.

Cobra Mission’s claim to fame is that it was the first erotic Japanese game to be fully localised into English and released in the US, courtesy of Megatech Software. This was before the violence and sex controversies surrounding *Mortal Kombat* and *Night Trap* that led to the ESRB being formed, when game publishing was still a wild, new frontier.



The Karoshic received 3 damages.
The Karoshic is looking at your belongings.

Battles require you to drag your weapon into the body part you want to attack, as many times as you can while the enemy attack charges



Cobra City is divided into six main areas you can explore; you’ll spend a lot of time aimlessly walking around and fighting random battles

You play as JR, a hotshot private eye visiting Cobra City. You meet with Faythe, a childhood friend, and must help her to solve a kidnapping. The game is divided into six city areas, which you must unlock one by one, investigating the crimes in the area and defeating the local gang leaders.

Cobra Mission is a rather crude adventure/RPG hybrid. You explore the city in a top-down perspective, visiting locations, talking to people, doing simple side-quests for money and searching for opportunities to ogle at naked ladies (such as peeking at a nude beach through a telescope).

The problem is that most of the time you’ll be walking around aimlessly, with no clues whatsoever. And every few steps you’ll be thrown into a random encounter. Moreover, some events must be done in a specific order or manner (including the sex scenes!), forcing retries and more aimless walking.

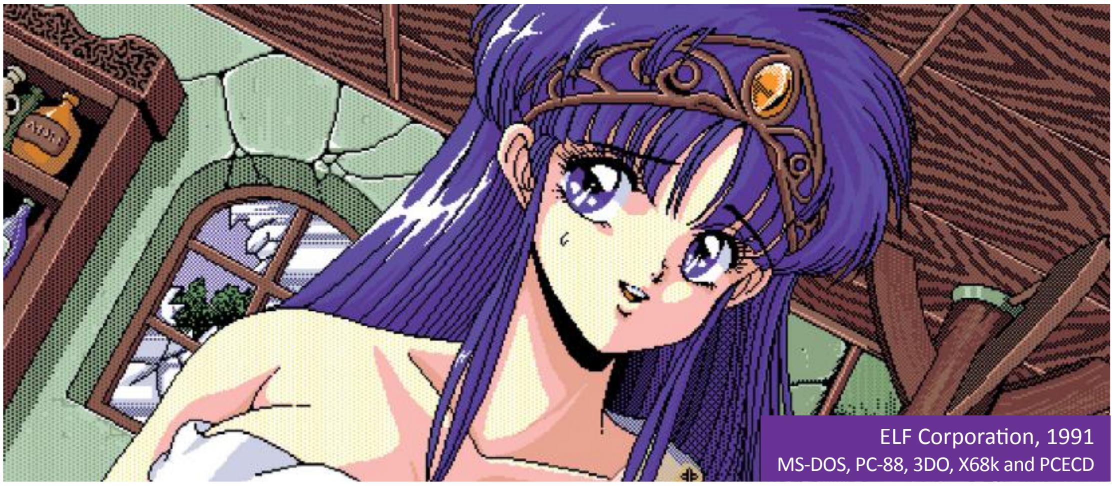
Combat is easy, but unique. To attack, you drag your cursor into the enemy part you want to hit – each enemy has different weak points. You must do this repeatably and as fast as you can, while the enemy charges a power bar to execute his attack.

Oddly, the Japanese version has standard JRPG turn-based combat. It was the team at Megatech who overhauled the combat and other parts of the game, adding more enemies, side-quests and sexy scenes, and re-drawing many of the characters.

Still, *Cobra Mission* is very mediocre. Its appeal came from novelty – an erotic game drawn in anime style made in distant Japan. For a teenager in 1992, it was a new, exotic and slightly off-limits treat.

While standards are a bit higher today, it’s still a style of game Western audiences aren’t used to, and *Cobra Mission’s* “so-bad-that-it-is-good” charm might just be enough to warrant a look. **FE**

Knights of Xentar



ELF Corporation, 1991
MS-DOS, PC-88, 3DO, X68k and PCECD

The second (and last) erotic RPG to be localised by Megatech, *Knights of Xentar*, was originally called *Dragon Knight III*. The first two games in the series were simplistic first-person dungeon crawlers, but *DK3* draws its inspirations from early *Final Fantasy* games, sporting a top-down perspective and a full party instead of a lone adventurer.

The game continues right where the previous ones left off. Having rescued a group of maidens from an evil witch, our hero Takeru (localised to "Desmond") wakes up from his celebration festivities suffering from a horrible hangover. And to add insult to injury, a group of local thugs robs our hero blind. Takeru starts the game literally stark naked. A simple, innocent quest to recover our hero's stolen jewels and his magical sword soon turns into an epic endeavour involving high Heavens and lowest depths of Hell.

You spend the majority of the time in a top-down 2D mode, exploring locales, talking to citizens and performing simple quests – with the game's lewd humour keeping things interesting. While you can freely travel between locations, the game is relatively linear, with artificial roadblocks limiting progress.

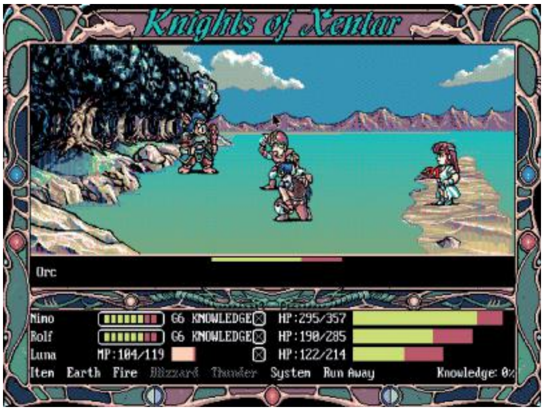
Combat itself is automatically resolved in real time, allowing you to occasionally interject using items and magic at opportune moments. As in most JRPGs, itemisation is extremely simplistic, being limited to armour and weapon upgrades, while level-ups automatically increase your base stats.

Overall, *Xentar* isn't very challenging. Some stronger enemies may pose as temporary roadblocks, but most of the challenge can be eliminated by simply grinding random encounters until you match your foes. Throughout the game, Takeru will also be meeting some familiar characters from the two previous games who will permanently join the party.

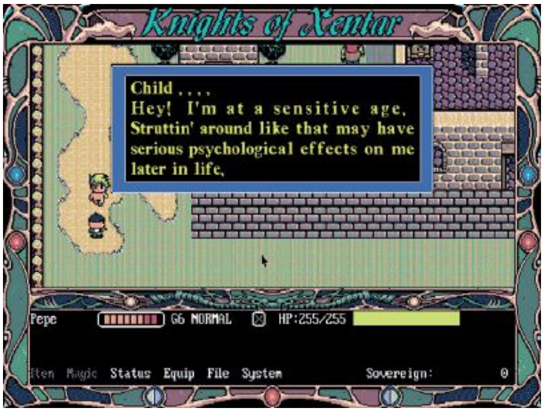
While the game features explicit (and bizarre) sex scenes, including rape, its US release was barely noticed and Megatech soon folded. Critics were more concerned with the dated visuals and the "archaic gameplay mechanics" than the kinky contents.

Despite the lukewarm reception, *Knights of Xentar* remains something of an achievement. For many adolescents, it was their first introduction to the depraved world of Japanese adult gaming. **HB**

***Knights of Xentar* was localised into English by Megatech Software in 1995; both censored and uncensored versions were released.**


Knights of Xentar
Orc
Nino G6 KNOWLEDGE HP:295/357
Rolf G6 KNOWLEDGE HP:190/285
Luna MP:104/119 HP:122/214
Iten Earth Fire Blizzard Thunder System Run Away Knowledge: 0%

Combat is in real time and mostly automatic; you can only select your character's behaviours and order them to use items and spells

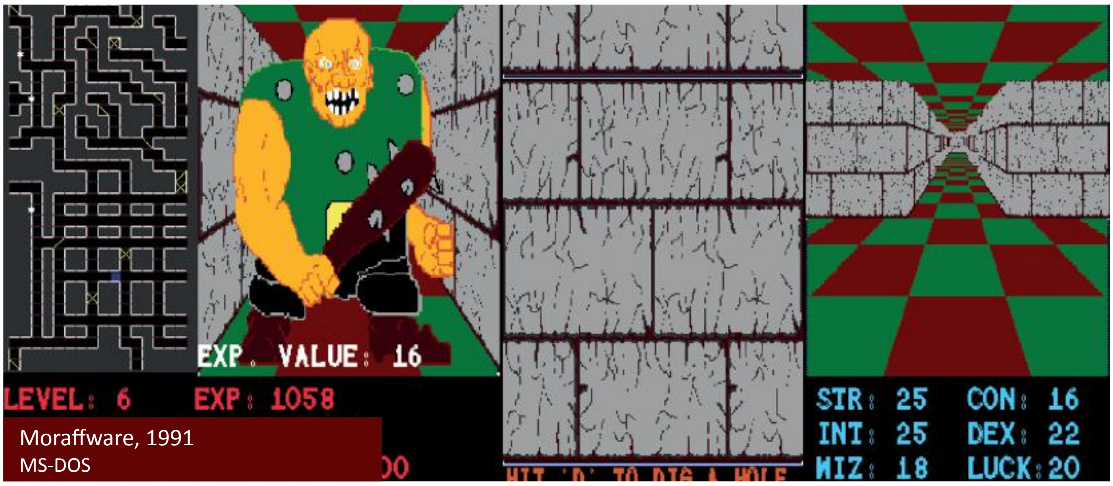


Child ....
Hey! I'm at a sensitive age,
Struttin' around like that may have
serious psychological effects on me
later in life,

Pepe G6 NORMAL HP:255/255
Iten Magic Status Equip File System Sovereign: 0

Xentar's humour is its first noticeable aspect, as you are immediately robbed and forced to run around naked

Moraff's World


EXP. VALUE: 16
HIT 'D' TO DIG A HOLE

LEVEL: 6 EXP: 1058

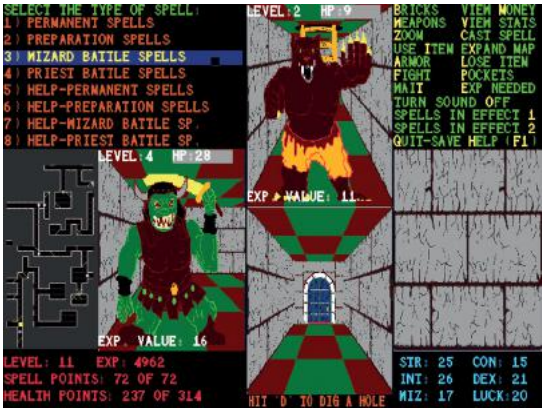
STR: 25 CON: 16
INT: 25 DEX: 22
WIZ: 18 LUCK: 20

Moraffware, 1991
MS-DOS

***Moraff's World* has a rare trait: it supports 12 different video modes, from 4-colour CGA all the way to 256-colour SVGA, which made it easy to run on any computer.**

Those who had access to BBSs, the Internet or shareware CD-ROMs in the '90s might have seen one of Steve Moraff's games: *Moraff's Revenge* (1988), *Moraff's World* (1991) and *Moraff's Dungeons of the Unforgiven* (1993), a trio of shareware dungeon crawlers.

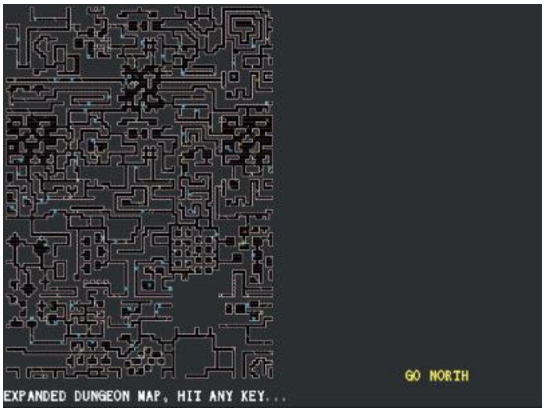
Moraff's World is the best-known, but they all offer basically the same gameplay, with incremental graphical upgrades. Relatively speaking, as its art style is always so amateurish it becomes oddly endearing.


SELECT THE TYPE OF SPELL:
1) PERMANENT SPELLS
2) PREPARATION SPELLS
3) WIZARD BATTLE SPELLS
4) PRIEST BATTLE SPELLS
5) HELP-PERMANENT SPELLS
6) HELP-PREPARATION SPELLS
7) HELP-WIZARD BATTLE SP.
8) HELP-PRIEST BATTLE SP.
LEVEL: 2 HP: 9
BRICKS
VIEW MONEY
WEAPONS
VIEW STATS
ZOOM
CAST SPELL
USE ITEM
EXPAND MAP
ARMOR
LOSE ITEM
FIGHT
POCKETS
WAIT
EXP NEEDED
TURN SOUND OFF
SPELLS IN EFFECT 1
SPELLS IN EFFECT 2
QUIT-SAVE
HELP (F1)
LEVEL: 4 HP: 28
EXP. VALUE: 11
EXP. VALUE: 16
HIT 'D' TO DIG A HOLE

LEVEL: 11 EXP: 4962
SPELL POINTS: 72 OF 72
HEALTH POINTS: 237 OF 314

STR: 25 CON: 15
INT: 26 DEX: 21
WIZ: 17 LUCK: 20

Combat is turn-based and very simple: fighters can only attack, but magic users have over 100 spells at their disposal


GO NORTH
EXPANDED DUNGEON MAP. HIT ANY KEY...

Dungeon floors are random and massive; the game gives tips on the locations of special enemies, but navigating towards them is a big challenge

What really stands out in Moraff's games is the four-way first-person view: you constantly see what's north, south, east and west of you. There's no "facing" – you can attack in any direction, and pressing the left arrow key moves you left, instead of turning.

Gameplay is a blend of Roguelikes and *Wizardry*. You create a character, choosing from eight races and seven classes, then delve into an enormous, randomly generated dungeon. You battle, gather XP and return to town to heal, level up and buy better equipment.

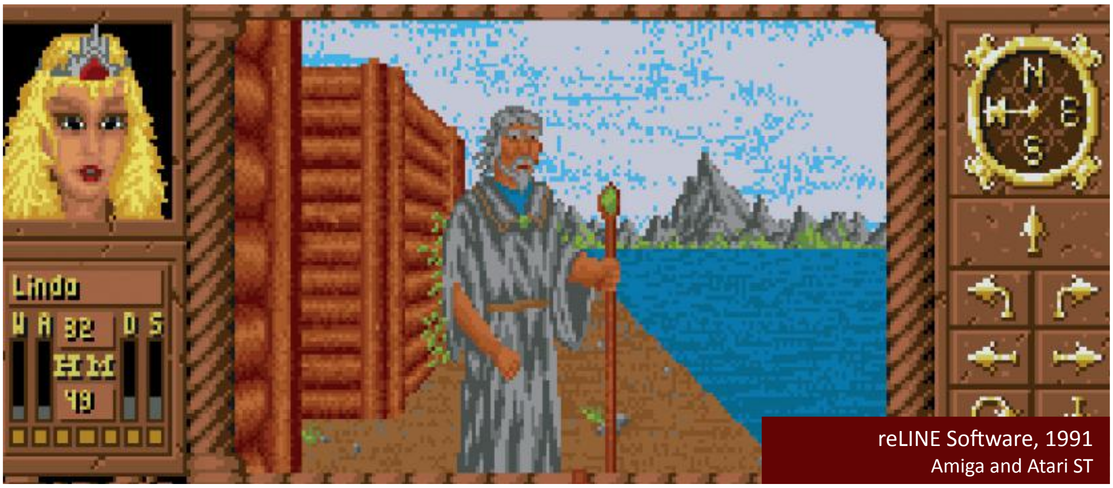
There's little variety in items or monsters, but it still makes for a surprisingly addictive loop, as you try to go as deep as possible, balancing risk and reward. There's no real story or goal either, but there are floors on which you can hunt a treasure-holding monster, following simple hints like "Go East" or "Go North".

These floors are the game at its best. The sheer size of each floor and the countless hidden pits that drop you a few floors make navigation very tricky. You'll have to think three-dimensionally, using the floors above and below to move towards your goal.

The shareware version of *Moraff's World* offers four of these hunts, on the 4th, 8th, 12th and 16th floors. If you paid and registered the game, it would unlock 200 dungeon floors! Beyond being overwhelming, this breaks parts of the game. Character progression stagnates and Fighters become useless, as spells are mandatory to quickly ascend and descent floors, heal, teleport and protect yourself from level-drain.

In an age when computers were still novel and retail RPGs like *Ultima* were expensive, Moraff's games were accessible and seemingly endless. Perhaps the best way to understand them (and many '90s sharewares) is to compare them with Flash or browser-based games – some discard them as not "real" games, yet they are widely played, often more than acclaimed classics. **FE**

Fate: Gates of Dawn



reLINE Software, 1991
Amiga and Atari ST

Fate: Gates of Dawn is an obscure, superlative German game. It's a first-person turn-based blobber with quite a few interesting features. You are able to control as many as four different parties with up to seven party members each – one of your parties can crawl through a dungeon level while another is in the city collecting rumours and a third one is out in the wild exploring the gigantic world.

To permit this, you're able to recruit almost every (friendly) NPC you meet. Every encounter lets you choose from several menus – chatting, charming, joking, bragging, etc. Depending on several (maybe random?) factors the NPCs react in various ways, from being upset and leaving without a word, through being angered and attacking, to starting to like you and wanting to join your quest.

Combat encounters are managed by menus too, and feel incredibly satisfying. The available mix of 11 races and 31 classes makes for interesting party composition – you really have to think about it, and must have several parties to be able to prevail in the sometimes hard-as-hell combat situations. There is a total of over 150 spells to choose from, with characters able to learn spells from different classes to satisfy all your character-building needs.

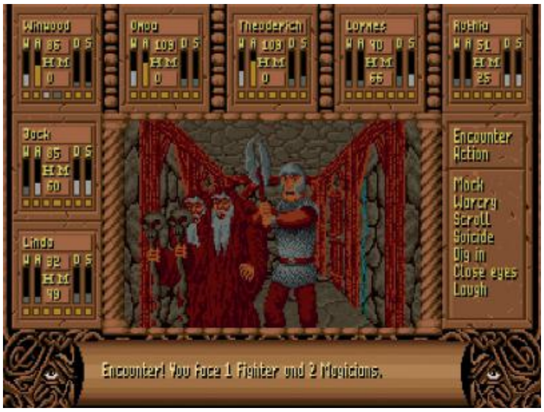
The world itself is one of the largest in an old-school game, brought to life by wandering NPCs and day-night cycles. Be it a magic well that replenishes your magic points, or a hole in which you find an NPC who might join your party or an incredible item – it's full of things for you to discover.

Then there are the dungeons, which are enormous too. There are several carefully crafted lairs, crypts and castles, riddled with complex puzzles, deadly traps and combat encounters that will all make you curse at the screen, but are very rewarding to complete.

Fate also has nudity, which was censored in the English release. This version is rare, as few copies were made, but the game has since become freeware.

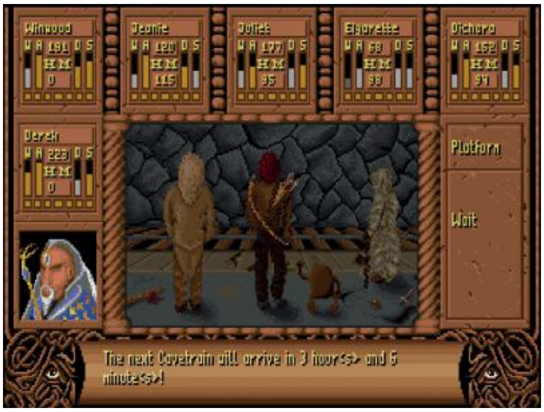
I cannot overstate how large the game is; even playing it with a guide would still easily require over 100 hours. If you enjoy large and complex RPGs, you should definitely play *Fate*. But I advise making good use of the eight save slots – there are multiple ways to completely screw up your game. **SR**

Olaf Patzenhauer, *Fate's* creator, passed away in 2011. He had created a sequel named *Fate 2* as a private project and freely gave custom versions of it to a few fans.



Encounter! You face 1 Fighter and 2 Magicians.

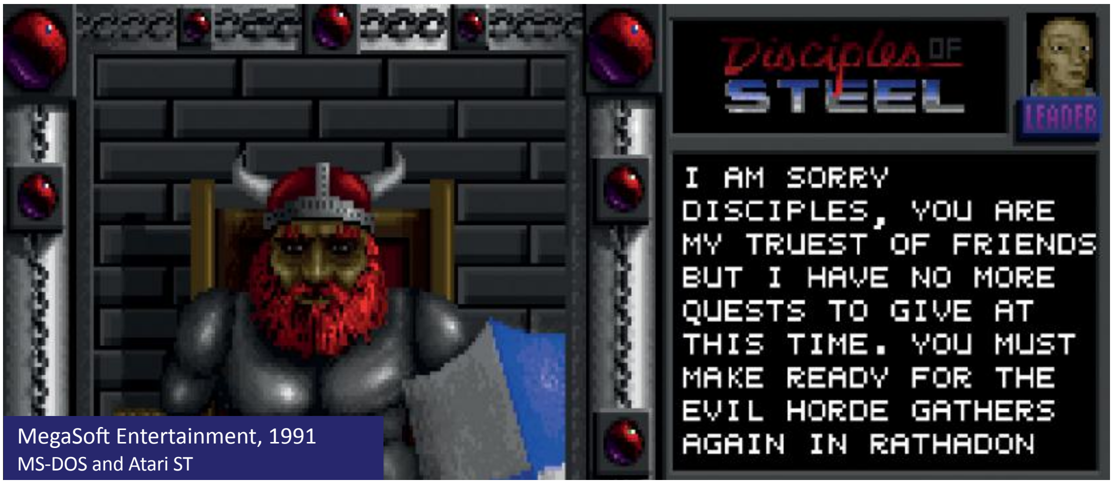
Perhaps as an expression of German humour, there are some odd options in combat, such as closing your eyes, groping, mocking, or asking party members to kiss



The next Covetrain will arrive in 3 hour<s> and 6 minute<s>!

Fate has a "cavetrain" that runs across its massive world, connecting the major cities

Disciples of Steel



I AM SORRY DISCIPLES, YOU ARE MY TRUEST OF FRIENDS BUT I HAVE NO MORE QUESTS TO GIVE AT THIS TIME. YOU MUST MAKE READY FOR THE EVIL HORDE GATHERS AGAIN IN RATHADON

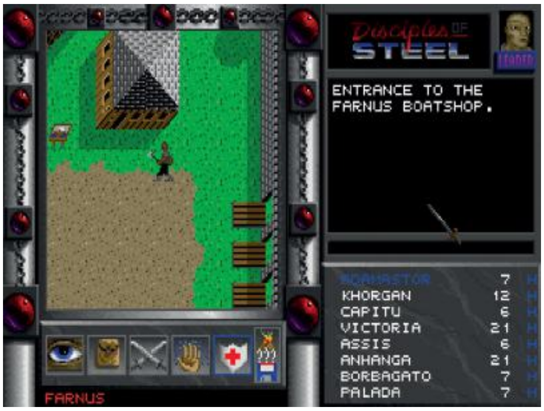
MegaSoft Entertainment, 1991
MS-DOS and Atari ST

Disciples of Steel was the only game from Texas-based MegaSoft. A sequel was planned, with greater focus on army battles, but piracy, poor sales and fierce reviews ended the series.

If an RPG is announced today, no matter its form or setting, one can assume it will have certain elements: meaningful character development; a rich backstory; combat that offers a variety of tactical options; a full inventory of weapons, armour and accessories; dialogue and role-playing encounters; a large explorable game world; a variety of quests and side-quests, etc. These have become so codified into what we understand a "role-playing game" to be that even its sub-genres, such as Roguelikes, have found ways to incorporate them.

There were no such assurances in the '80s and early '90s. The decade was full of games that excelled in one area or another but rarely presented a complete "package" of role-playing elements the way that players of today might understand them. *Ultima*, for all its strengths, never had an excellent combat system, while *Dungeon Master* and its clones could never tell a coherent story.

Disciples of Steel does offer such a complete package. It's a bold game, ambitious beyond the capabilities of its time. It does so much that, even though it gets a lot of them wrong, there's still an awful lot that it does right.



ENTRANCE TO THE FARNUS BOATSHOP.

[illegible]	7
KHORGAN	12
CAPITU	6
VICTORIA	21
ASSIS	6
ANHANGA	21
BORBAGATO	7
PALADA	7

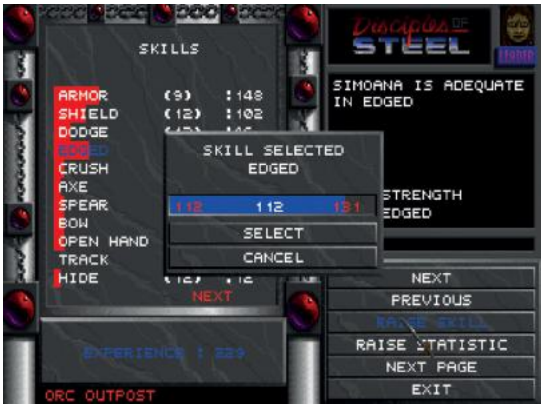
You explore the world map and its various towns in a top-town view, but the towns are huge and mostly empty, with no real NPCs besides those in stores, inns and temples

A fully voiced intro with animated graphics sets up the backstory. Twelve years ago, a horde of orcs appeared and, to counter the threat, the kingdoms of Lanathor united under the banner of warchief Ustfa Nelor and his elite Disciples of Steel. Although they drove off the hordes, it was a Pyrrhic victory, as few Disciples survived, and these all disappeared on the return journey. The game casts the player as Nelor's stepson, encouraged by a mysterious sorceress to reform the Disciples and destroy evil for good.

You start by creating a party of eight characters. For most of its mechanics, the developers were heavily inspired by SSI's *Wizard's Crown* (1985). The similarities exist in the types of races (human, dwarf, elf, half-elf, gnome, halfling, ogre and troll) and classes (Warrior, Knight, Priest, Mage, Illusionist, Rogue, Monk, Ranger and Blacksmith), their associated skills and the basic mechanisms of magic and combat.

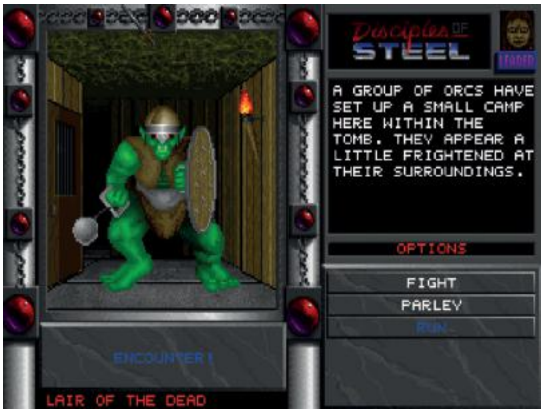
Thus, combat is wonderfully tactical. It takes place on a top-down grid full of enemies and obstacles, with characters acting in order of initiative and capable of a huge number of actions – moving, attacking, casting, scanning the battlefield, equipping items, hiding, picking up items, performing first aid, aiming to improve the chance of hitting the next round, etc. The several dozen spells divided among the game's three spell-casting classes – all of which give you the ability to adjust the number of points channelled into them – only add to the tactical options.

Then there's a myriad of other nuances – weapons and armour can take damage and break; weight and encumbrance greatly affect combat ability; individual body parts can be injured and must be treated separately from hit points, etc. The trading of items is governed by a complex bargaining system, and the economy itself is far more advanced than in other RPGs.


Disciples of STEEL
SKILLS
ARMOR (9) :148
SHIELD (12) :102
DODGE
EDGED
CRUSH
AXE
SPEAR
BOW
OPEN HAND
TRACK
HIDE
NEXT
SKILL SELECTED
EDGED
112 112 131
SELECT
CANCEL
STRENGTH
EDGED
NEXT
PREVIOUS
RAISE SKILL
RAISE STATISTIC
NEXT PAGE
EXIT
ORC OUTPOST

SIMOANA IS ADEQUATE IN EDGED

Characters in *Disciples of Steel* have 8 stats and 22 skills, which are increased by directly spending experience points


Disciples of STEEL
OPTIONS
FIGHT
PARLEY
RUN
ENCOUNTER!
LAIR OF THE DEAD

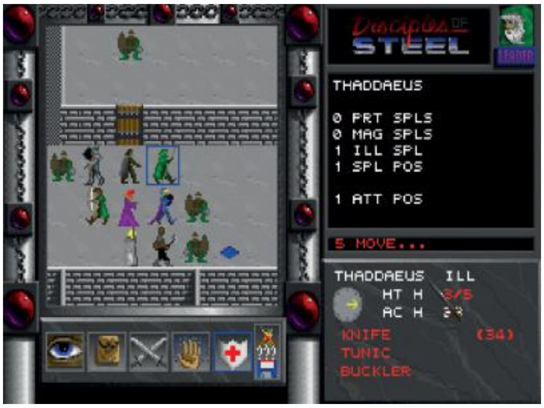
A GROUP OF ORCS HAVE SET UP A SMALL CAMP HERE WITHIN THE TOMB. THEY APPEAR A LITTLE FRIGHTENED AT THEIR SURROUNDINGS.

Dungeons are explored in first-person mode, with a handy automap and room descriptions that set the atmosphere

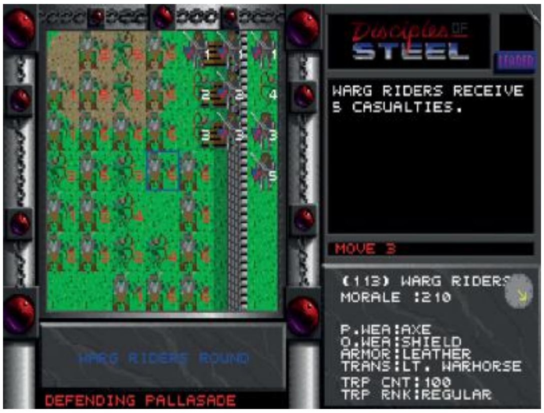
Understanding these systems is vital, as *Disciples* is a very hard game. You start with little direction in a hostile environment. All areas and dungeons are open at the outset, so it's easy to stumble into somewhere you're not ready for – and that's just about everywhere. A new player might lose four of five beginner battles, and it takes about a dozen hours to stabilise the party.

Once you're feeling ready, you should visit each of the nine kingdoms and solve a series of quests for each king. The quests vary considerably in length and difficulty, and many intertwine. Reaching the end of a king's quest-line results in the king either agreeing to ally with the Disciples when the Big Battle comes or actually turning over the kingdom to the Disciples, letting them set tax rates and raise and equip armies.

At this point, an entirely different side to an already complex game becomes available: the ability to field large armies and attack other kingdoms on a strategic map. You move stacks of troops against their opponents, observing equipment, morale, and terrain. That such a complex system is basically optional is one of the amazing things about *Disciples of Steel.*


Disciples of STEEL
THADDAEUS
0 PRT SPLS
0 MAG SPLS
1 ILL SPL
1 SPL POS
1 ATT POS
5 MOVE...
THADDAEUS ILL
HT H 3/5
AC H 23
KNIFE (34)
TUNIC
BUCKLER
???

Combat occurs on a tactical map with terrain and obstacle considerations, e.g. you can lock a door to divide the enemy


Disciples of STEEL
1
2
4
3
5
MOVE 3
(113) WARG RIDERS
MORALE :210
P.WEA:AXE
O.WEA:SHIELD
ARMOR:LEATHER
TRANS:LT. WARHORSE
TRP CNT:100
TRP RNK:REGULAR
WARG RIDERS ROUND
DEFENDING PALLASADE

WARG RIDERS RECEIVE 5 CASUALTIES.

Once you gather allies (or subdue them), the game reveals strategy battles inspired by SSI's *Sword of Aragon* (1989)

The game even offers the ability to skip the quest threads entirely and just assassinate the various kings and queens and take over their kingdoms. This involves storming their castles and slaying their guards – an extremely hard battle, but absolutely winnable.

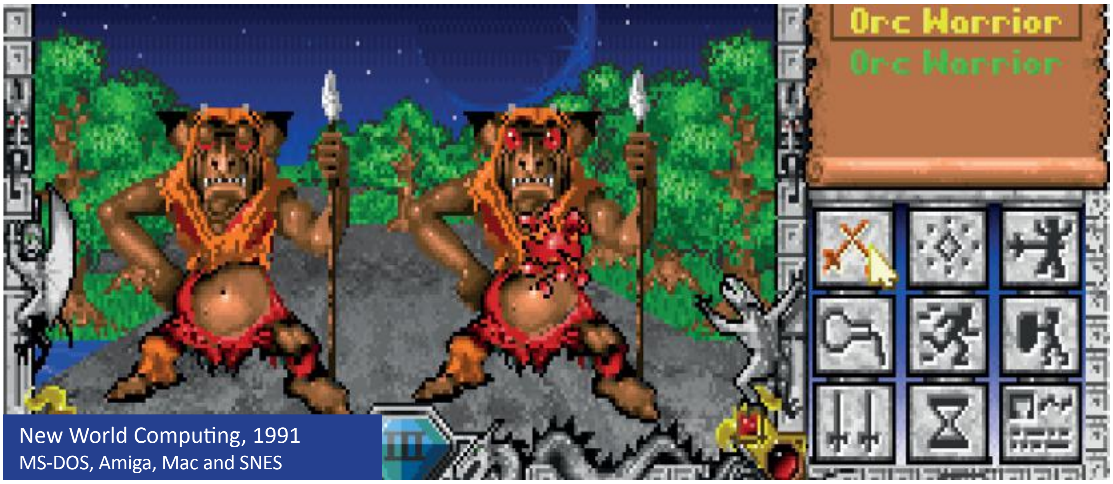
You can win the game in three ways: kill the evil wizard Variz in his dungeon with your party (a traditional RPG path); wait until the "Armageddon" date when Variz leads his forces against Lanathor and defeat him with your armies (a strategy path); or conquer each of the enemy cities before the deadline.

However, to be a fan of *Disciples of Steel* – and I am an unequivocal fan – is to forgive an awful lot of things. There's a food and water meter that never budges, useless conversation options, a "search" function that never finds anything, skills and spells that have no use, a poor manual, many bugs, an unsatisfying ending, etc.

And yet, despite failing in so many things, *Disciples of Steel* performs excellently in the core areas that make a good RPG – tactical combat, magic, equipment, character development, and quests – and is thus enormously fun to play even today. **CHB**

Disciples of Steel **was heavily criticised for its initial difficulty, so developers released an update in which characters start with 1,000 experience points to spend.**

Might and Magic III: Isles of Terra

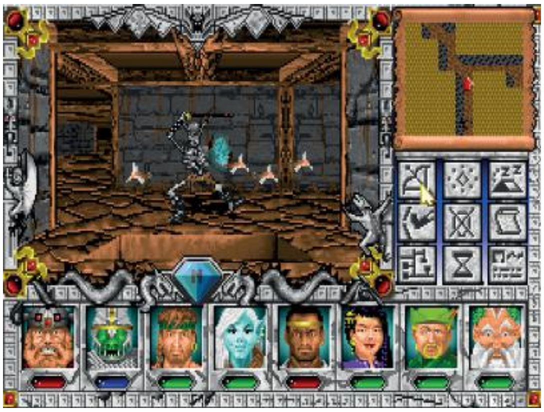


New World Computing, 1991
MS-DOS, Amiga, Mac and SNES

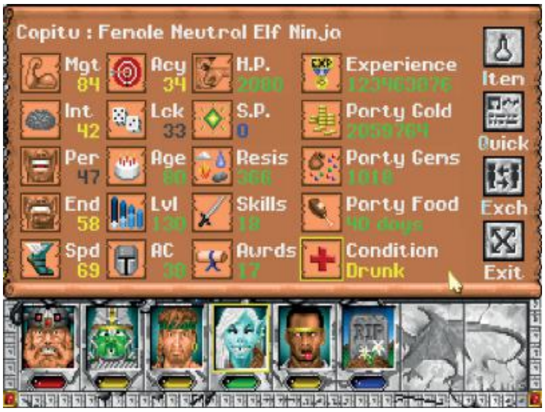
One of the most remarkable things about the *Might and Magic* series is how New World Computing kept innovating in each title. *Might and Magic III: Isles of Terra* is a good example of this, with several changes from its predecessor.

As soon as you start, you're greeted by colourful VGA graphics, rich sound, a fantastic mouse-based interface and several quality-of-life improvements, such as the ability to save the game anywhere.

Scorpia, the renowned video game journalist, wrote a harsh review of *M&M II*. As revenge, New World Computing added a poisonous monster named after her to *M&M III*.



Enemies, traps and points of interest are now visible in the distance, allowing for ranged combat and more engaging exploration



Capitu : Female Neutral Elf Ninja

Mgt 84
Acy 34
H.P. 2080
Experience 123463876
Int 42
Lck 33
S.P. 0
Party Gold 2059764
Per 47
Age 80
Resis 366
Party Gems 1018
End 58
Lvl 130
Skills 18
Party Food 40 days
Spd 69
AC 38
Awrds 17
Condition Drunk

Instead of the classic name list, *M&M III* displays portraits of your party members at the bottom of the screen; their expressions change as they take damage or suffer conditions

Gameplay-wise, the most important addition is that now enemies are now actual entities roaming the map, rather than just being random encounters that spawn out of nowhere. You can see them from a distance and even engage in ranged combat; sometimes this is essential to defeat enemies that have the ability to kill party members in one blow, but it can prove to be deadly against enemies such as dragons.

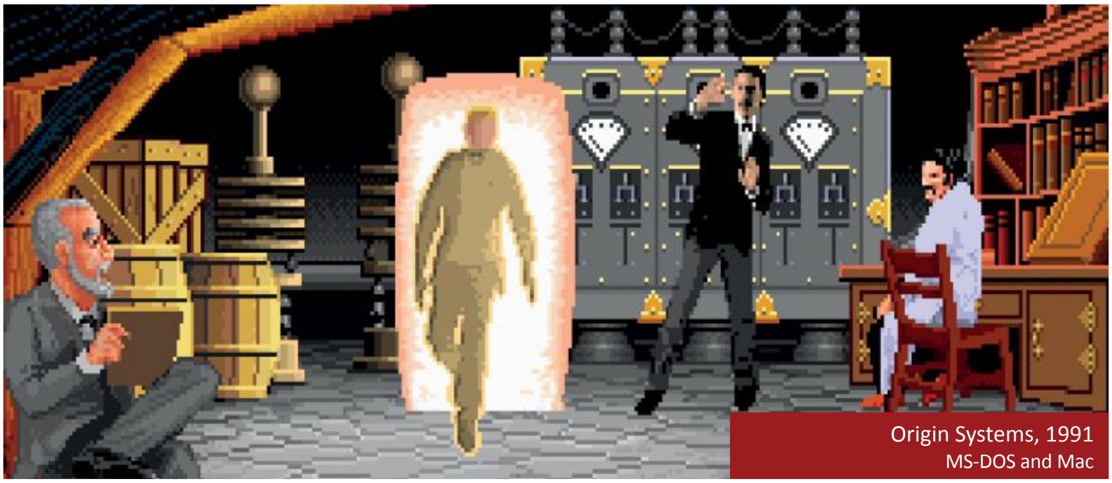
You start your adventure by creating a party of six characters, choosing between five races and ten classes. You can also hire two NPCs, who will ask for daily wages to accompany you. *Isles of Terra* features many new skills and equipment pieces (which now have durability), plus a new realm of Nature magic, expanding upon the series' character system.

Once ready, your party sets off to fight against Sheltem, your antagonist in previous titles, who must now be defeated in his own homeworld of Terra. The quest is very open and can be completed in different ways, which allows you to explore a huge world full of secrets, riddles, tough challenges and good humour, plus the chance to achieve the rapid and explosive power growth the series traditionally offers.

Exploration is another of the signature marks of the *Might and Magic* series, and one of the strongest points of *Isles of Terra*. Each location feels unique, monsters are extremely varied and constantly present different challenges that you can't just defeat by brute force. Despite the massive power inflation, there seems to always be a good item upgrade to be found, making you smile greedily – and you'll certainly need it, because the game is very tough.

This balance between rewarding your curiosity and punishing your carelessness is where *Isles of Terra* excels, maybe offering the most satisfying exploration in the whole series. **DB**

Worlds of Ultima: Martian Dreams



Origin Systems, 1991
MS-DOS and Mac

It's 1893. Percival Lovell builds a space cannon to fire a team of trained volunteers to Mars. Instead, sabotage sees it fire during the World's Columbian Exposition, while half the Victorian era's greatest minds are aboard. Jump to 1991. The Avatar receives a mysterious book, explaining how the Orb of the Moons can also be used to travel through time, and containing a desperate plea to join the other half of the Victorian era's greatest minds on a rescue mission.

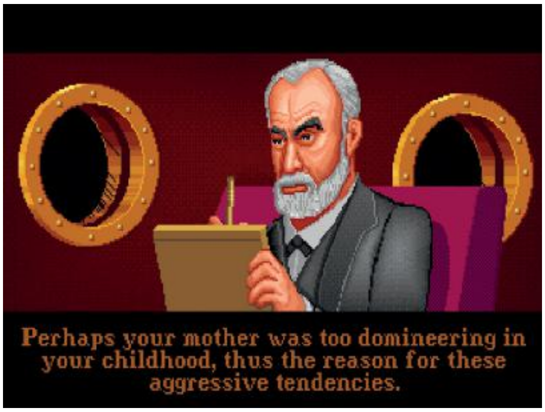
Martian Dreams has many problems, many of them the fault of the already clunky and ugly *Ultima VI* engine, and for most of the rest the fact that Mars isn't the most visually exciting of locations. It's easily one of Origin's best ideas though, and full of ideas deserving a remake. The combination of real history and classic sci-fi, with several drops of *Ultima* for good measure, works superbly, even before the amusement of elements like replacing the Gypsy character creation system with psychoanalysis by Sigmund Freud. ("Ja, ja, I am thinking you are sounding like great mage …")

Aside from its regular combat sequences, *Martian Dreams* is as much an adventure as it is an RPG, with a very linear path. Much of the plot revolves around the fate of the Martians, ignoring the fact that the Avatar has actually been there already, back in *Ultima II*, and it's a decent story, spoiled only by the fact that the limited dialogue system doesn't allow for working alongside the likes of Tesla, Roosevelt and Nelly Bly to have the character it really needed.

When it hits its peaks though, it offers some great moments. A definite highlight is when the game's villain declares that even with the Avatar's new ability to summon items from dreams – essentially, the Martians are in a dream version of *The Matrix* – humanity won't be able to imagine a weapon capable of stopping him for a hundred years or more!

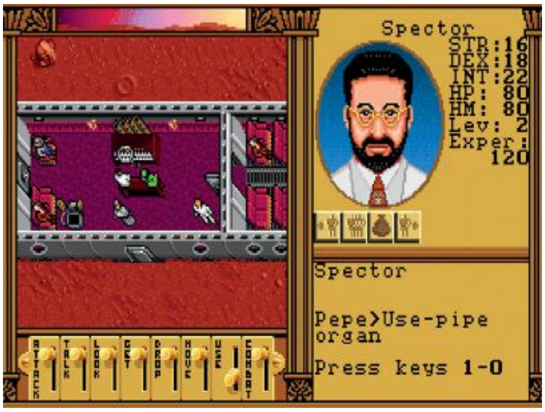
Being a time-traveller, and a time-traveller from Texas at that, the Avatar wastes little time before casually whipping up an M60 machine gun out of thin air.

To some extent, this kind of moment almost makes trying to play *Martian Dreams* more frustrating. It was a good game in its time, but now it's hard to see past the gulf between what it is and what its ideas deserved. They're all there for the stealing though, and well worth a second outing. **RC**



Perhaps your mother was too domineering in your childhood, thus the reason for these aggressive tendencies.

Instead of creating your character with the Gypsy and her cards/potions, you answer questions from Sigmund Freud



Spector
STR:16
DEX:18
INT:22
HP: 80
HM: 80
Lev: 2
Exper: 120

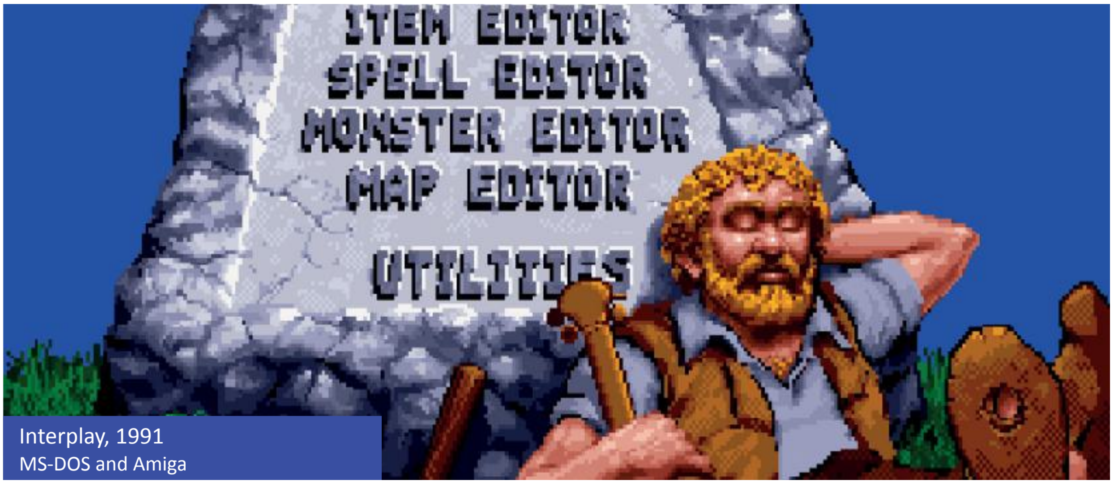
Spector

Pepe>Use-pipe organ

Press keys 1-0

The Avatar will be joined by many great personalities from the Victorian era, as well as the alter ego of a certain game developer

The Bard's Tale
Construction Set

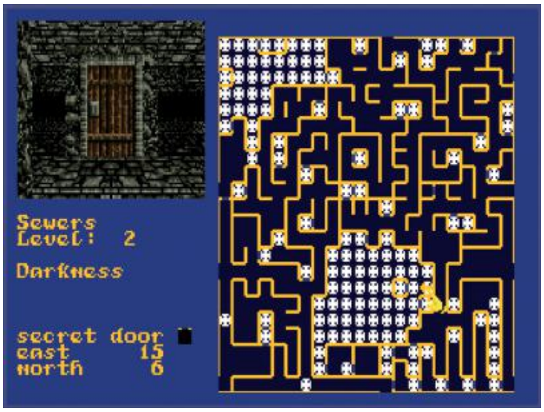


Interplay, 1991
MS-DOS and Amiga

The Bard's Tale series was a hit back in the mid-'80s, adding colourful graphics and a light-hearted atmosphere to the classic *Wizardry* formula. But it was a short-lived one, as the series ended in 1988 due to a legal dispute between Interplay and EA.

Meanwhile, the genre kept moving forward, with titles like *Dragon Wars*, *Might and Magic III*, *Wizardry VI*, the Gold Box series, etc. Yet, in 1991 Interplay returned to *Bard's Tale* – this time with an editor!

***BT Builder* is an open-source implementation of the *Bard's Tale Construction Set*. A build under development is available at www.identicalsoftware.com/btbuilder.**

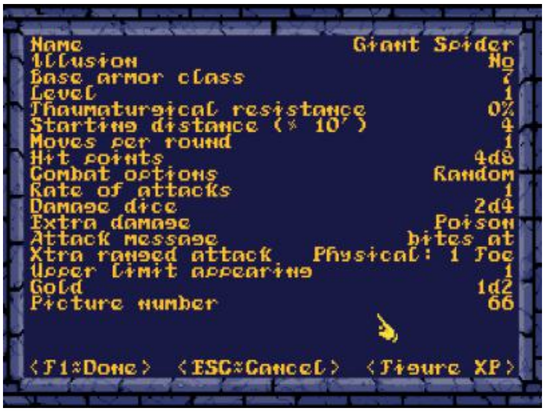


Sewers
Level: 2

Darkness

secret door
east 15
north 6

The map editor is the game's best feature, with four tilesets, a powerful tool for creating events and the option to quickly test while you build the maze



Name	Giant Spider
Illusion	No
Base armor class	7
Level	1
Thaumaturgical resistance	0%
Starting distance (x 10')	4
Moves per round	1
Hit points	4d8
Combat options	Random
Rate of attacks	1
Damage dice	2d4
Extra damage	Poison
Attack message	bites at
Xtra ranged attack	Physical: 1 Foe
Upper limit appearing	1
Gold	1d2
Picture number	66

You can edit the stats of items, monsters and spells to create new ones, but you can't edit the rules behind them or add new ones, limiting your options

Unfortunately, it's a rather sad return. The goal was to allow players to make their own RPGs – they can even export them as stand-alone games – but the editor suffers from severe limitations. Races, classes and stats can't be changed at all – you're stuck with the *Bard's Tale* rules. And while you can create custom items, spells and monsters, the variables are so limited that even recreating the original *Bard's Tale I* would be impossible. The graphics, while good-looking, lack variety, allowing for few interesting encounters. Overall, there just isn't enough flexibility to create anything other than a lesser *Bard's Tale* clone.

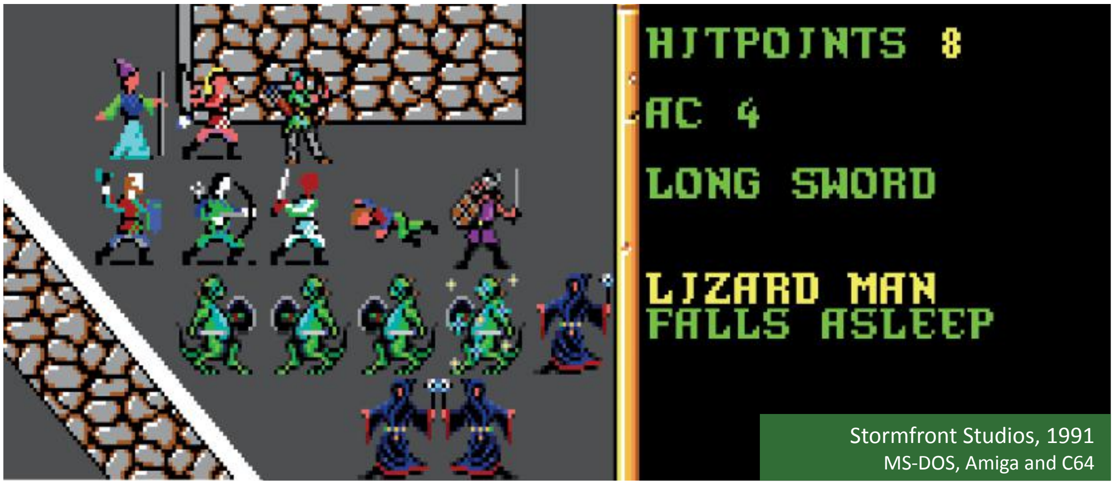
In fact, the *Construction Set* came with its own sample scenario, *Star Light Festival*, which was just that – an inferior *Bard's Tale* game. Slow, grinding and with none of the series' original creators or charm, it felt out of place next to the great RPGs of the era.

The killing blow came with the arrival of SSI's *Forgotten Realms: Unlimited Adventures* (1993), a much more powerful editor for the popular Gold Box series. From that point on, anyone still interested in creating their own RPG had no reason whatsoever to choose *The Bard's Tale Construction Set*. This is particularly noticeable in how rare fan-made modules are.

Searching online, the only surviving modules are *The Bard's Lore 1* and *2*, created by John H. Wigforss in the late '90s, and *The Bard's Quest: Dungeons of the Unknown* (1994), by Visionsoft. The former are simple games full of jokes and pop culture references, while the latter is nothing more than Interplay's *Star Light Festival* module repacked with a new name – possibly to be shamelessly resold as a stand-alone game.

As such, while there are still communities for *Unlimited Adventures* and even for older games like *Eamon*, the *Bard's Tale Construction Set* never took off, and now lies completely forgotten. **FE**

Gateway to the Savage Frontier



```
HITPOINTS 8
AC 4
LONG SWORD

LIZARD MAN
FALLS ASLEEP
```

Stormfront Studios, 1991
MS-DOS, Amiga and C64

The *Savage Frontier* duology is another one of SSI's fabled Gold Box series, usually the one people play only after they've gone through every other Gold Box game. This is kind of backwards, as the first game, *Gateway to the Savage Frontier*, is probably the best entry point to them overall.

Difficulty is pretty low at first, but after that you get an epic scavenger hunt that offers a lot of content and just hits all the right *AD&D* adventure buttons.

The game is basically a grand tour of the Savage Frontier, a region of the Forgotten Realms, with each of the cities you visit acting as a mini-adventure, until you reach the big and satisfying finale. For me, that was the biggest draw of the game. It's not overly ambitious in terms of complex mechanics or storytelling, but it really captures the fun of a long-running RPG campaign that starts small and slowly ups the ante.

While *Gateway* showed that Stormfront Studios had a good grasp of the Gold Box engine, it's really in the second game, *Treasures of the Savage Frontier* (1992), that they came into their own. It's where they really stretched their coding muscles and improved a lot of the series' various gameplay elements.

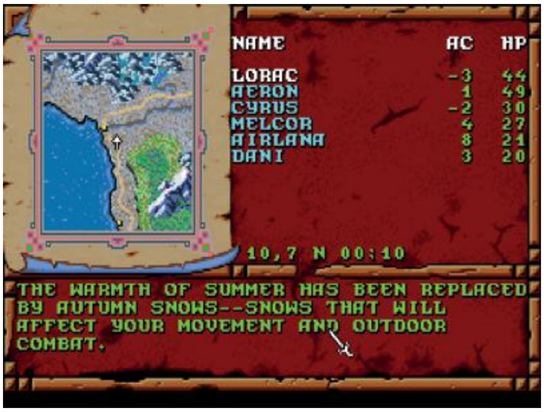
Treasures enhances the overworld map with weather effects (conveyed by text messages), different movement speeds and increased encounter rates based on the terrain type. Only roads and waterways are safe. As you get further along in the game, the seasons change, with graphical changes to the overland map and within cities. There are rudimentary side-quests, while some of battles become more dynamic, with enemies getting reinforcements if you don't beat the main force fast enough.

Still, the most famous "improvement" to the gameplay is that, like *Worlds of Ultima: The Savage Empire* before it, *Treasures* contains a romance plot.

It's more than just titillation: if one of the smitten partners gets killed, the other goes into a rage until the end of the fight. And later on, if the party doesn't support the romance, you lose the NPC and your main character has decreased combat effectiveness.

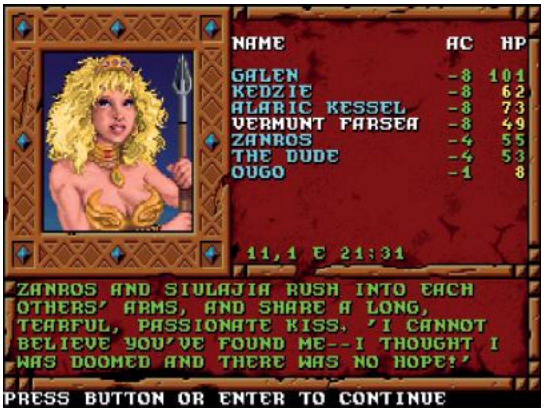
While often overlooked, the two *Savage Frontier* games offer the chance to follow your adventurers through a long and varied campaign, with a big climax that makes it all the more fun to play. **JG**

Stormfront Studios made three Gold Box games for SSI: the two *Savage Frontier* games and the original *Neverwinter Nights* (1991).



```
NAME               AC  HP
LORAC              -3  44
AERON               1  49
CYRUS              -2  30
MELCOR              4  27
AIRLANA             8  21
DANI                3  20

10,7 N 00:10
THE WARMTH OF SUMMER HAS BEEN REPLACED
BY AUTUMN SNOWS--SNOWS THAT WILL
AFFECT YOUR MOVEMENT AND OUTDOOR
COMBAT.
```

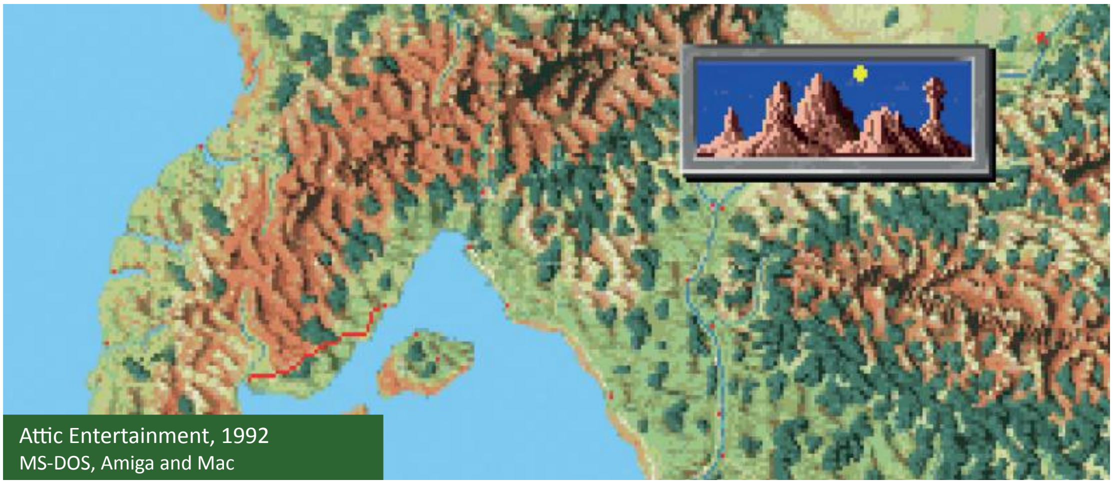
The large overworld map is one of *Gateway*'s defining features, and was expanded in *Treasures*, with weather effects such as snow slowing your characters down



```
NAME               AC  HP
GALEN              -8 101
KEDZIE             -8  62
ALARIC KESSEL      -8  73
VERMUNT FARSEA     -8  49
ZANROS             -4  55
THE DUDE           -4  53
OUGO               -1   8

11,1 E 21:31
ZANROS AND SIULAJIA RUSH INTO EACH
OTHERS' ARMS, AND SHARE A LONG,
TEARFUL, PASSIONATE KISS. 'I CANNOT
BELIEVE YOU'VE FOUND ME--I THOUGHT I
WAS DOOMED AND THERE WAS NO HOPE!'
PRESS BUTTON OR ENTER TO CONTINUE
```

Treasures of the Savage Frontier has two romanceable NPCs. Which one you gets depends on your lead character's gender, and they can directly impact gameplay

Realms of Arkania: Blade of Destiny


Attic Entertainment, 1992
MS-DOS, Amiga and Mac

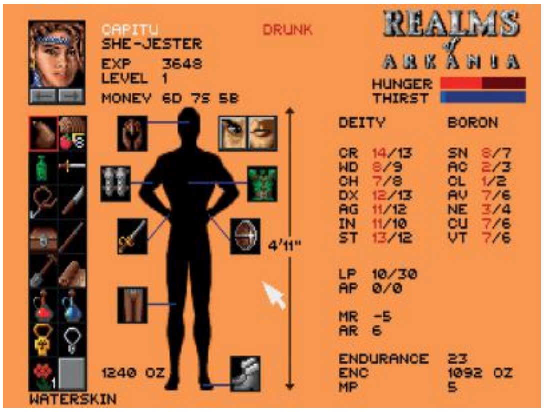
***Das Schwarze Auge* was first released in Germany in 1984, but it was only translated into English in 2001. *Blade of Destiny* was translated by Sir-Tech and published in the US in 1993, but they renamed the setting to *Realms of Arkania*.**

To understand the effect the *Realms of Arkania* trilogy had on the German market, one has to look back at the state of tabletop role-playing games in the early ’90s in Germany.

Back then, *Das Schwarze Auge (The Dark Eye)* – the German answer to *Dungeons & Dragons* – was enjoying its prime. Huge shelves of *TDE* books lined not only specialist hobby stores, but every toy store in Germany. Even today it remains the country’s most successful RPG franchise by a great margin.

After cutting their teeth with a few small CRPGs, Attic Entertainment got the *TDE* licence and created a game that was as faithful to the tabletop game as possible – exactly what fans at the time wanted.

In *Blade of Destiny*, players are pitted against a threatened invasion of orcs into medieval Scandinavia-lookalike Thorwal. To repel them, the heroes have to find the titular Blade of Destiny. Of course, this being a videogame, there is a map leading to the sword; a map that has been split into many parts and strewn across the land. You get your first rough directions, then off you go.



```
CAPITU                DRUNK
SHE-JESTER
EXP    3648                      HUNGER
LEVEL  1                         THIRST
MONEY  6D 7S 5B

                   DEITY       BORON

                   CR  14/13   SN  8/7
                   WD  8/9     AC  2/3
                   CH  7/8     CL  1/2
                   DX  12/13   AV  7/6
                   AG  11/12   NE  3/4
                   IN  11/10   CU  7/6
                   ST  13/12   VT  7/6

                   LP  10/30
                   AP  0/0

                   MR  -5
                   AR  6

                   ENDURANCE   23
1240 OZ            ENC         1092 OZ
                   MP          5
WATERSKIN
```

You should prepare carefully: carry water, food, ropes, tools, herbs and torches; take care of your weapons; and bring blankets and warm clothes for cold areas, or you’ll get ill

After the intro, you’re free to do whatever you like. Exploring is split between towns and dungeons, seen in a first-person view, and a 2D overworld map where you choose your travel destinations.

Travelling is a big part of the game. Your journey is shown by an Indiana Jones-style red line on the map and occasionally interrupted by events presented in CYOA fashion – “Do you help the injured Elf?” – as well as ambushes and random encounters.

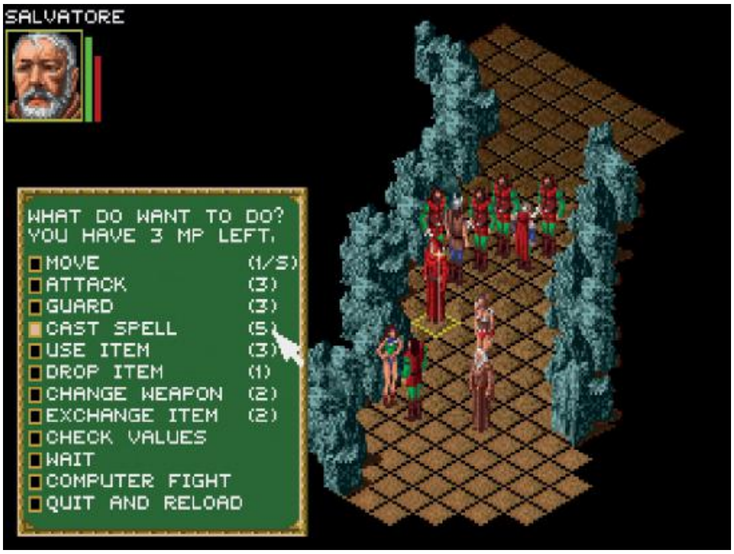
For the turn-based battles, the game switches to an isometric view. Characters receive action points, based on their individual speeds and how much armour they carry. These points can be used for everything from various types of attack, through spell-casting, to movement and inventory management.

How faithfully the game adhered to the tabletop game’s background and ruleset is still impressive after more than twenty years. The developers worked closely with the designers of *TDE* and everything – from the dice-based character generation to the skill set and the huge spell list – was lifted directly from the tabletop game, with only a few concessions and adjustments (for better or worse).

Thus, you’ll deal with an overwhelming number of stats: 14 attributes, 52 skills and 48 spells, plus derived stats. Each spell has its own proficiency level, and skills cover everything from herb-collecting and haggling to ancient tongues. Creating the six members of your party can take a long time – and yes, it’s very easy to waste points on things you’ll never need.

The game also demands a lot of micromanaging, from food and drink to carrying suitable clothing for a northern climate if you don’t want your heroes to be struck down with illness. And every time you camp on the road you’ll have to assign who will hunt and heal the injured, the guard shifts, hours of sleep, etc.

> “The area where these games truly excelled, in my opinion, was the micromanagement of characters. I know, it sounds bad, but for many players this is what they were looking forward to. We wanted to make the most hardcore RPG out there, and I think we succeeded, all the way down to making sure players were feeding their characters on a regular schedule. Naturally, this kind of level of detail did not sit well with everyone.”
>
> *– Guido Henkel,*
> Blade of Destiny*’s producer*



WHAT DO WANT TO DO?
YOU HAVE 3 MP LEFT.

- ☐ MOVE (1/S)
- ☐ ATTACK (3)
- ☐ GUARD (3)
- ■ CAST SPELL (5)
- ☐ USE ITEM (3)
- ☐ DROP ITEM (1)
- ☐ CHANGE WEAPON (2)
- ☐ EXCHANGE ITEM (2)
- ☐ CHECK VALUES
- ☐ WAIT
- ☐ COMPUTER FIGHT
- ☐ QUIT AND RELOAD

In each turn, your characters have a limited number of movement points available, which dictates how far they can walk and what actions they can perform

Unfortunately, what was a huge selling point for tabletop veterans made things difficult for new players. As a *TDE* player, you knew all the tricks and exploits. As a newcomer, you were often left to your own devices, constantly flipping through the manual.

Still, the strength of the game has always been the setting. Digital Thorwal is dripping with atmosphere, with detailed text descriptions, small illustrations and countless Choose Your Own Adventure segments. Some of the texts are simply nonsensical jokes, but most of them are well-written pieces that immerse you in the setting. And the intricate (and often unforgiving) rules help ground you in this land.

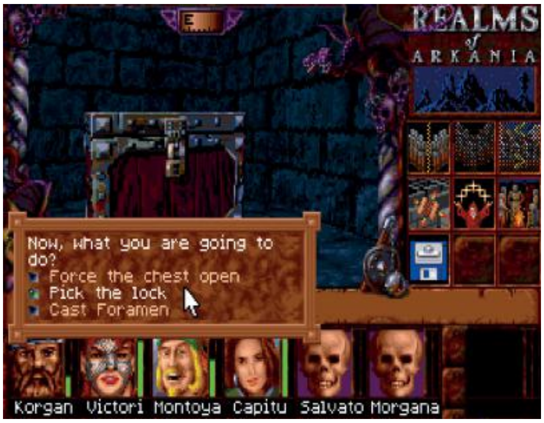
And boy, it’s a huge land. The main story is not too interesting, but there’s just so much to explore! You can travel through forests, climb mountains, delve deep into various dungeons, eradicate a pirate village, set sail with a ghost ship, etc. Wherever you go, there’s always something interesting to find.

After the success of the first game, came the sequels. *Star Trail* (1994) is commonly held as the high point of the series and adhered closely to the concept of its predecessor, while also adding a better dialogue system, fully 3D towns and dungeons and other upgrades that made the experience more satisfying.

The third game, *Shadows over Riva* (1996), removed the overland travel altogether and took place in a single, well-realised and fully fleshed-out city, with a more elaborate plot. It also used its CD-ROM format to add pre-rendered backgrounds and voiced cutscenes. Moreover, a party created in *Blade of Destiny* could be carried across the entire trilogy, in a truly epic journey.

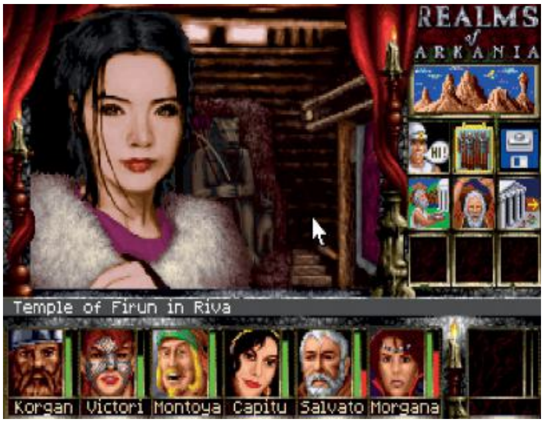
After that, the Northlands fell into silence. There have been ill-fated attempts to revive it, but the tabletop role-playing game boom had already passed. Still, from time to time, I can feel the temptation to return to Thorwal, to meet its people and explore its lands. If only I could remember the rules. **TI**

In 2013 a remake of *Blade of Destiny* was developed by Crafty Studios, but it was incomplete on release, with severe bugs and translation issues. It has been heavily patched since, but it’s still a crude and poorly-made title. Stick to the original trilogy.



Now, what you are going to do?
- Force the chest open
- Pick the lock
- Cast Foramen

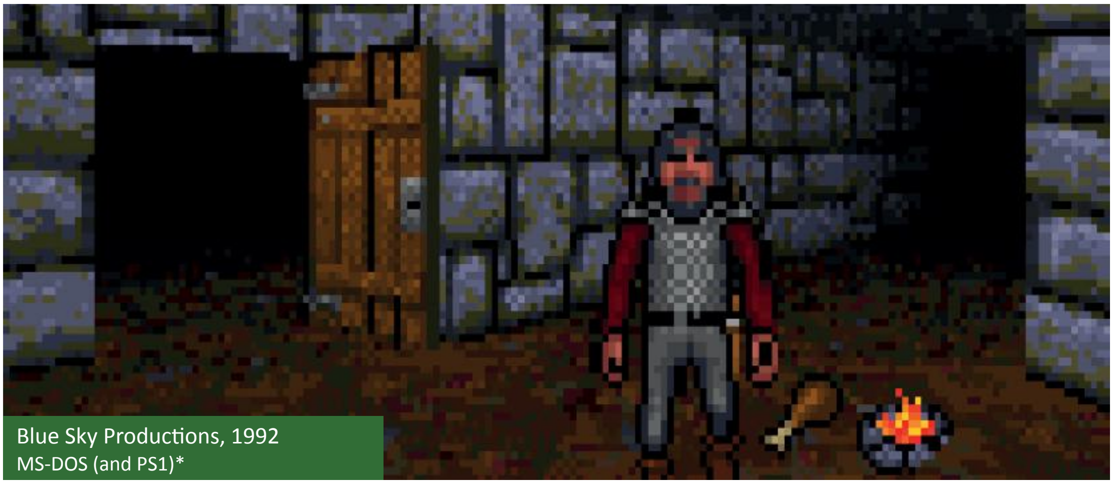
Towns and dungeons in the original game are explored in a step-based first-person mode – but the sequels are fully 3D



Temple of Firun in Riva

The third game has great art and many UI improvements, but arrived in the US only in 1997 and was seen as outdated

Ultima Underworld: The Stygian Abyss



Blue Sky Productions, 1992
MS-DOS (and PS1)*

Known as the first "true" 3D commercial RPGs, *Ultima Underworld* and its sequel were ahead of their time in many ways, full of stand-out ideas and innovations. So much attention is devoted to the pioneering technology, long ago rendered obsolete, that the other exceptional features of this classic PC game series are often ignored.

Of course, the free-moving 3D was ground-breaking even when compared with *Wolfenstein 3D*, released later in 1992. Where the precursor to *Doom* offered only flat, featureless floors and 90° angles in exchange for fast gameplay, *Underworld* featured fully texture-mapped environments with angled walls, slopes, cliffs, rivers of swimmable, flowing water and dangerous lava – all governed by a physics system that influenced all moveable objects.

In spite of the 3D graphics being confined to a limited-size window for rendering speed on early systems, the environments in *Underworld* are immersive and complex. The floors and walls are littered with interactive elements, from pull-chains and levers to edible plants and hallucinatory mushrooms.

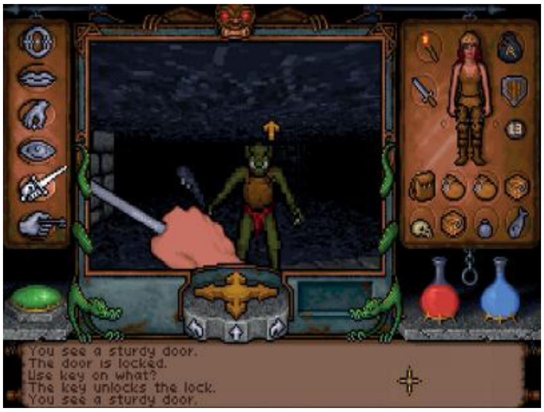
The story is a paint-by-numbers affair that starts with the player's character – unrecognised as the Avatar of Virtue – being locked into the Stygian Abyss to prove his or her innocence by rescuing the Baron's daughter. The titular Stygian Abyss is only eight levels deep, but the sprawling, detailed levels traversed at methodical pace represent hours of play each.

For me, the real story is the environment and the dialogues about the history of the Stygian Abyss – a noble attempt to build a peaceful utopia turned into a hellish nightmare of bickering, isolated factions scraping a minimal survival. Throughout the dungeon are the remains of past battles and events. Combined with the stories of the denizens and scrawled notes, the player's own imagination builds a history and a new story with the player's character as interloper.

There's something about this claustrophobic environment that remains compelling even today. The confines of the dungeon and the limited resources within define the player's entire world. The details are important: the quality and ownership of equipment, the freshness of the food, the composition of the floor, the apparent flaws in the wall texture indicating a secret passage, the apparent mood of the creature down the hall, and much more. Like the core *Ultima* games of the era, the interactivity with the world was far beyond that of most RPGs before and even since.

No shops or merchants exist within the depths of this dungeon. There are several creatures inclined to trade, but within the Abyss the barter system rules. The creature type, disposition, and hints about their preferences, not an arbitrary gold-piece value, dictate trade values. Not only does this make sense and feed the narrative, but it also makes the other characters more interesting. Simple as it was, their likes and dislikes impacted the player's world.

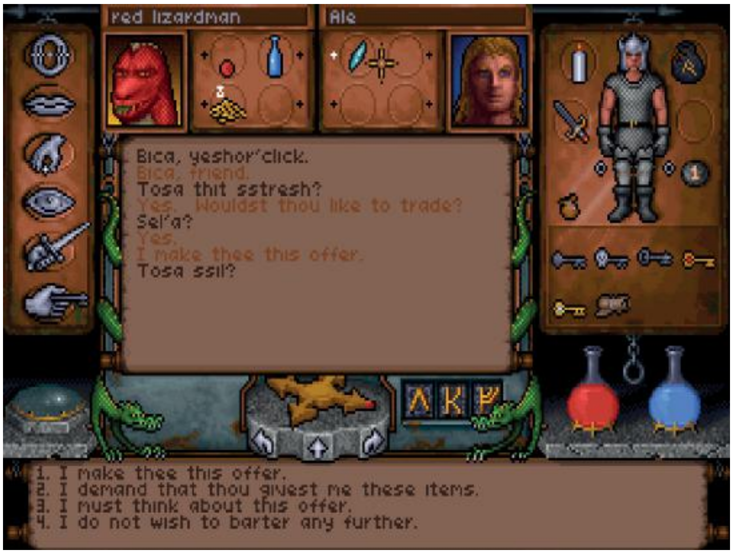
***A port of *Ultima Underworld* was released for the PS1 in 1997, which replaces enemy sprites with 3D models. Oddly, this version was only released in Japan.**



You see a sturdy door.
The door is locked.
Use key on what?
The key unlocks the lock.
You see a sturdy door.

The icons on the left allow you to talk, grab, look, fight and use; there are also several types of attack depending on your mouse movement

> "We had a huge advantage in that even though we were trying to make a hybrid game and we were trying to figure out what a dungeon simulator was, we had all the *Ultima*-ness of it to fall back on. Sure, we were inventing how to move and how to swing your sword and all that stuff, but at the end of the day it was an *Ultima*. You talk, you get, you drop, you combine reagents, you use runes."
>
> *– Doug Church,*
> Ultima Underworld*'s programmer*


red lizardman
Ale

Bica, yeshor'click.
Bica, friend.
Tosa thit sstresh?
Yes. Wouldst thou like to trade?
Sel'a?
Yes.
I make thee this offer.
Tosa ssil?

1. I make thee this offer.
2. I demand that thou givest me these items.
3. I must think about this offer.
4. I do not wish to barter any further.

You can talk, bribe and barter with various creatures in the Abyss; the Lizardmen require you to first learn their language, word by word

Perhaps because the team was, as a whole, fairly inexperienced in game development, the puzzles and challenges possess a raw, rule-of-cool wildness that, to me, feels like the sort of thing a human game master in a tabletop RPG might come up with just because it sounds like fun. One section of a level is mapped like a *Pac-Man* maze, requiring the player to pick up blue nuggets pursued by a ghost. To communicate with the Lizardmen, the player must learn their language a bit at a time. Many challenges are open-ended, allowing the player several methods to accomplish their goals using the rules systems and 3D environment.

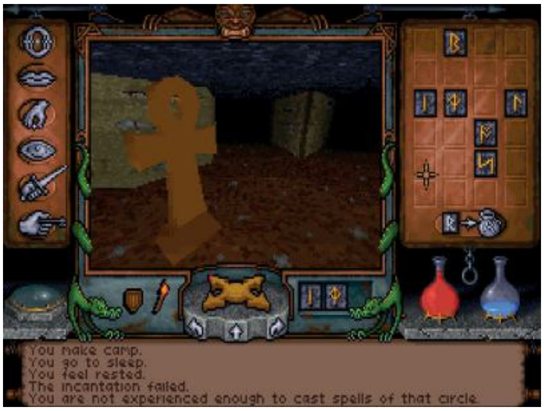
More innovations and improvements to the genre are sprinkled liberally throughout the game, including a beautiful automap that allowed free-form note-taking, an early faction system, and even some limited crafting. While limited by the technology of the day, its design would still be considered ambitious for anyone but a major AAA studio.

Ultima Underworld II: Labyrinth of Worlds (1993) appeared shortly afterwards, providing a number of incremental improvements. The story was more carefully crafted and integrated as a follow-up to *Ultima VII*. Characters had more to say, and what they said and did would change as events transpired. The game offered a cleaner interface along with better balance and technology. And, in spite of the extremely tight development schedule, it still retained the fundamental gameplay, feel and creativity of the original.

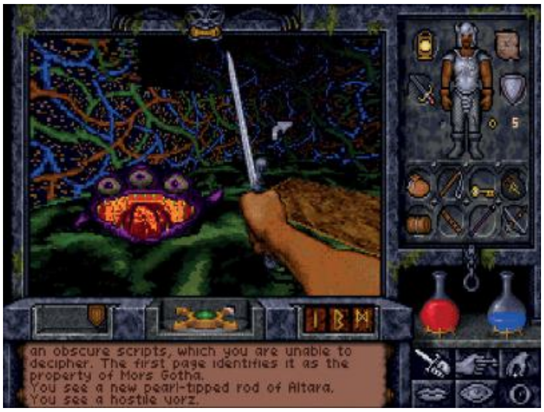
Together, these games provide some of the best dungeon-crawling experiences to be found on the PC, something too often forgotten in their chief claim to fame of being the first "true" 3D RPGs. Pioneering and primitive they may be, but, not far beneath the VGA graphics and clunky interfaces, the games conceal wonderfully visceral dungeon exploration still well worth playing today. Come prepared to kiss the sunlight and outdoor air goodbye for a while. **JB**

In the *Masters of Doom* book, it's revealed that John Romero and Carmack were inspired by an *Ultima Underworld* demo to make *Catacomb 3-D*, which later led to *Wolfenstein 3D* and *Doom*.

The best way to play *Ultima Underworld 1* now is using Underworld Exporter, a Unity port of the two games.


You make camp.
You go to sleep.
You feel rested.
The incantation failed.
You are not experienced enough to cast spells of that circle

The game features 48 spells, like Levitate, Telekinesis and Stealth, cast by combining runes you find across the Abyss


an obscure scripts, which you are unable to decipher. The first page identifies it as the property of Mors Gotha.
You see a new pearl-tipped rod of Altara.
You see a hostile vorz.

Ultima Underworld II sends the Avatar to multiple worlds; they are all underground, but offer some graphical variety

Might and Magic: World of Xeen

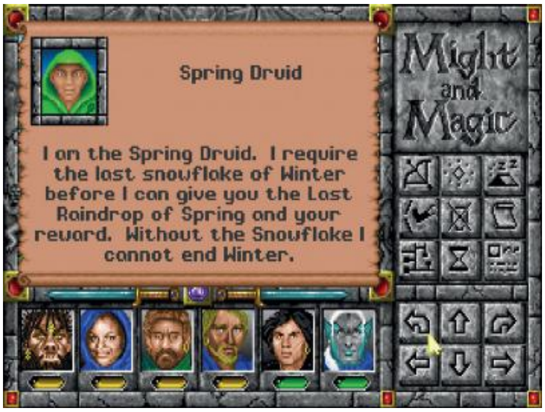
New World Computing, 1992
MS-DOS, Mac and PC-98*

***New World Computing released an enhanced CD version of *World of Xeen* in 1994 that added new voiced content to the game.**

Might and Magic: World of Xeen is actually an adventure composed of two distinct games: *Might and Magic IV: Clouds of Xeen* (1992) and *Might and Magic V: Darkside of Xeen* (1993). Played separately, these games are typical *Might and Magic* games, but when both are installed in your computer they combine into a continuous experience.

Xeen is a flat, square-shaped world, and in each game you explore one side of the planet – first defeating the infamous Lord Xeen on the Light Side, then battling his master, Sheltem, on the Darkside. Magical pyramids spread across the land allow you to travel between the two sides, exploring each at your own pace. Furthermore, *World of Xeen* adds a new batch of quests, requiring you to face challenges across all of Xeen to reach the game's true ending.

World of Xeen is the ultimate 2D game of the series before the move to 3D in *Might and Magic VI* and beyond. It was also the last game that New World Computing published independently before being acquired by The 3DO Company. As a game developer, I find the games like *Xeen*, at the cusp of a transition, to be particularly interesting.



Spring Druid

I am the Spring Druid. I require the last snowflake of Winter before I can give you the Last Raindrop of Spring and your reward. Without the Snowflake I cannot end Winter.

Side-quests are usually very simple, based on finding an object or killing a specific enemy, but they are creative

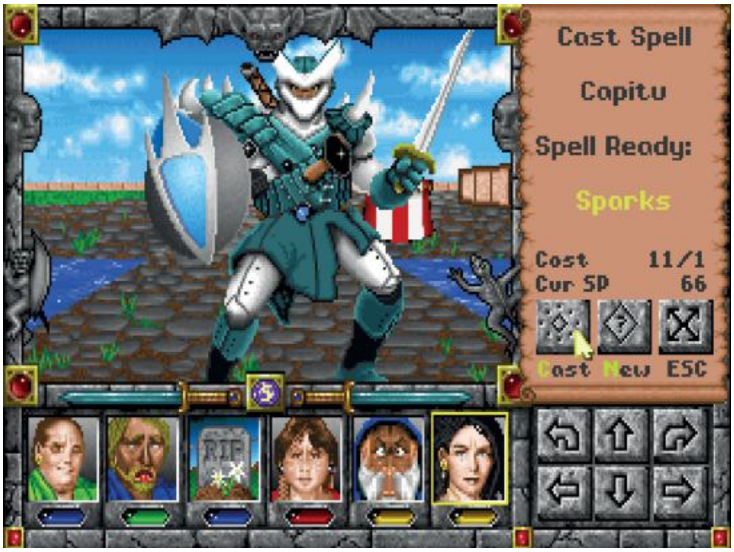
Xeen's production values show that New World Computing wanted a grand game. The art is lush and detailed, the world is massive by any standard, there are voiced cutscenes not often seen, and the fact that the two games combined together to form a complete whole set it apart from any other RPG.

Gameplay-wise, *World of Xeen* is a direct descendant of prior *Might and Magic* games and borrows many mechanics, particularly from the third game. You create a party of six characters of various classes and races. You have a standard selection of weapon users, spell slingers, and hybrid classes that can use heavy gear and spells. Your race choice gives you some benefits and penalties in the short term. Advancement comes from gaining new levels, as well as acquiring skills to help you in your adventures, such as Path-finding, Swimming and Linguistics. Items created by combining base types with random attributes also add to character power.

Power inflation is the hallmark of the *Might and Magic* games, and you see it clearly here. Your party starts out weak, but magical items and temporary buffs to statistics, hit points, or magic points can make any party orders of magnitude more powerful. While this seems silly, it allows for the player's knowledge to give advantages that simply grinding levels could not. This power inflation also makes it so that the adjustments you got from your starting character choices have less of an impact at the endgame.

Movement and fighting are the usual grid- and turn-based affairs of first-person RPGs of the time. Characters with ranged weapons and spellcasters can fire at enemies approaching from a distance; however, be warned, enemies can do the same. Knowing how to move and not expose yourself to attacks can be the difference between victory and defeat.

> "I have always felt the game systems I created were very robust, probably the biggest strength of the games and still holding up today. Plus the free-form nature of the game worlds is very appealing. […] Although I have a special fondness for *Might and Magic I,* since I did the entire game myself, I would still have to say *World of Xeen* was my favourite and the pinnacle of the game systems, universe and conclusion to the original story."
>
> *– Jon Van Caneghem,*
> Might and Magic*'s creator*



Enemies have large, expressive and sometimes humorous animations, but even the silly ones can inflict nasty status effects and wipe out your party

The land in each game is large, with 24 map locations, each of which is 16 × 16 squares. On top of all this explorable area, there are ten towns, some castles, and dozens of dungeons to explore. Progressing across the map often requires your characters to cast certain spells or to learn special skills.

There are plenty of exotic places to visit. The gorgeous physical maps included with the games show a wide variety of biomes: huge deserts, lava lakes, dense forests and frozen expanses. In addition, there are fantastical places where you can levitate over clouds and walk along roads in the sky. The game feels like a heroic sword-and-sorcery story, with different elements thrown together in a hodge-podge of fun. The important part is the adventure, not necessarily any thematic or logical consistency with the "real world".

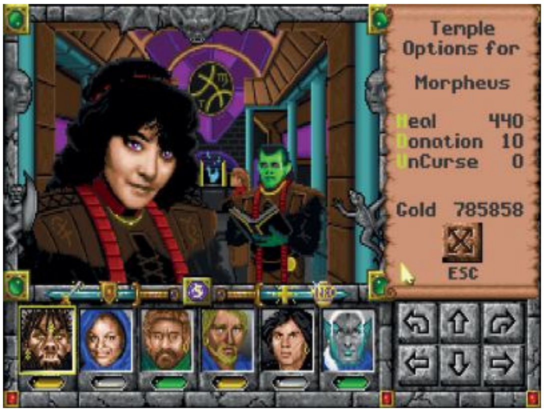
The puzzles are particularly interesting, as they tend to rely on knowledge from outside the game and can be daunting to non-English speakers.

For example, one dungeon has you solving a crossword puzzle using clues. The sheer number of puzzles makes the game more challenging than just hacking up monsters and taking loot. Of course, those playing the game now can just look up a handy FAQ to get past the tricky parts.

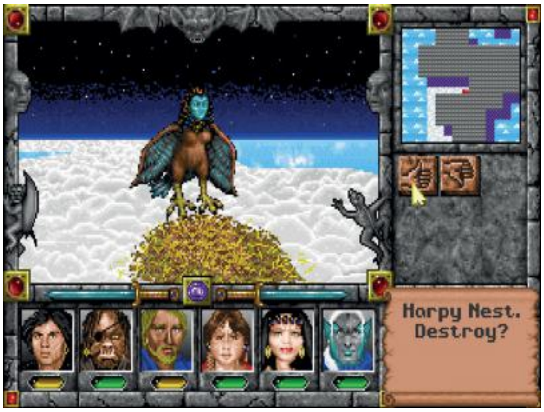
As mentioned before, the game also has cutscenes as part of a larger story. The story continues with standard fantasy tropes that blend with slowly revealed sci-fi elements – another hallmark of the *Might and Magic* series. As the player approaches the end of the game, the true plot becomes revealed: the events of the game are the conclusion of a grand fight that spanned all the prior games in the series.

In all, *World of Xeen* is a game that includes practically everything. If you look hard, you can probably even find a kitchen sink somewhere. But, because of its immense scope and place in history, the game stands as a landmark RPG for good reason. **BG**

In 1995 a group of fans created a mod of *Might and Magic V* named *Swords of Xeen*. New World Computing then endorsed and released the mod as an official bonus scenario.

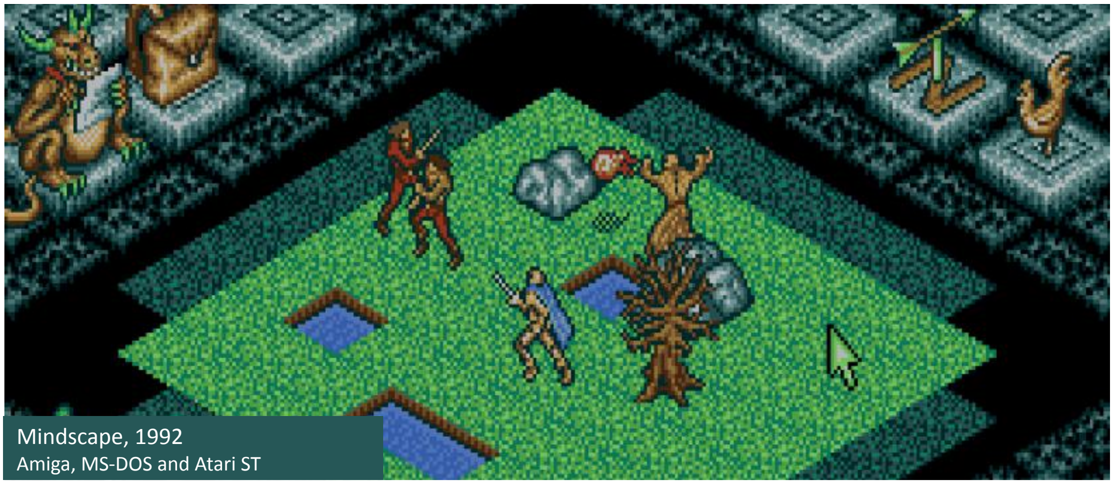


The game has a unique visual style, using an iconic colour palette, a few digitised photos and a light-hearted tone



Some areas have special requirements, like learning to swim to cross a river or casting Levitate to walk on clouds

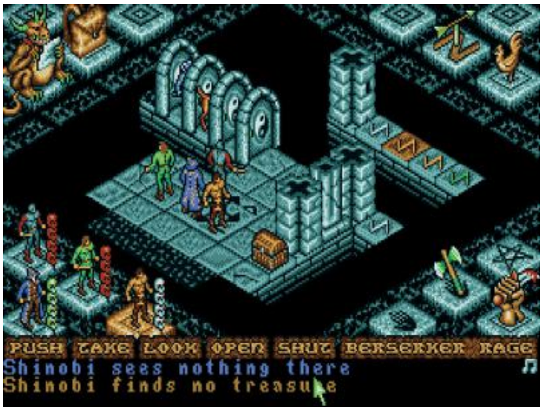
Legend



Mindscape, 1992
Amiga, MS-DOS and Atari ST

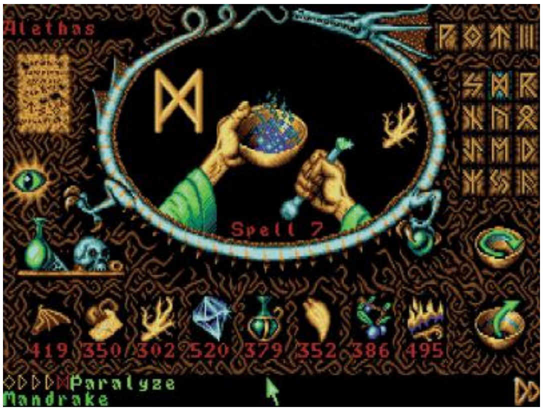
When, as a 12-year-old, I first played *Legend* (titled *The Four Crystals of Trazere* in the US), I was left confused. Until that day RPGs for me were always turn-based, but now my party ran in real time, sometimes fighting monsters faster than I could react. Nevertheless *Legend* quickly became one of my all-time favourite RPGs, because of the fascinating magic system and isometric view – another two features that were new to me.

A sequel was released in the same year, called *Worlds of Legend: Son of the Empire*, this time with an Eastern setting.



Shinobi sees nothing there
Shinobi finds no treasure

A tricky riddle room at the Dark Tower: you must mix and cast a couple of complex spells to open the four doors to the west



Mixing a deadly spell: all runes are present and our Runemaster has a good stock of reagents too

The land of Trazere is in a state of emergency as an ancient force of chaos begins to transform ordinary citizens into monsters. Seeking to save the kingdom, four heroic adventurers gather at the city Treihadwyl: The Berserker, a warrior prone to uncontrollable rage; the Troubadour, who plays magical tunes; the Assassin, a master of deception who can turn invisible and backstab enemies; and the powerful Runemaster.

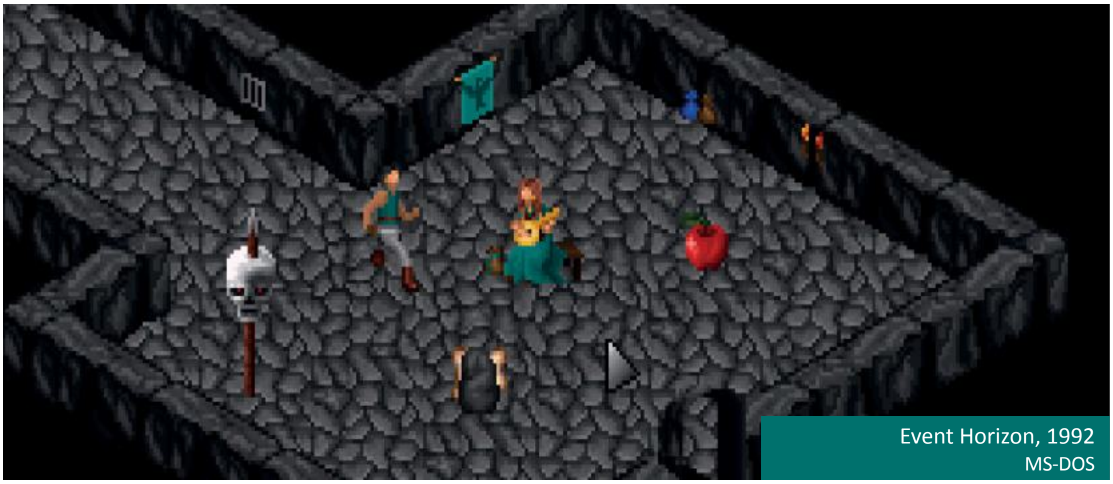
Legend plays on two levels, the map and dungeon views. On the map, the group can travel to towns, villages, forts and special locations – including enemy army camps in the field. They can visit blacksmiths, apothecaries, taverns, temples and artificers, and level up at the Guild – if they are experienced enough.

When the party enters a dungeon, the game switches into an isometric view. Enemies appear randomly and combat is mostly automatic – click on the rally icon and the group will seek the nearest enemy and start to fight – but you can also individually control each character. Each dungeon level also has a special puzzle room, which must be solved by casting various spells using the Runemaster.

The magic system is the highlight of the game, allowing the Runemaster to create various spells by mixing reagents and runes. For example, to create an offensive spell that first hits an enemy, then all adjacent foes around, inflicting damage and paralysis, the Runemaster needs the runes Missile (for the flight characteristics), Surround (for the environmental effect), Damage (for harm) and Paralyse (for paralysis). The ingredients are then mixed in the mortar through a nice animation and become a spell, which the Runemaster can now cast once.

The combination of its unique magic system and challenging dungeon riddles makes *Legend* a great title, suitable for all fans of classic RPGs. **MH**

The Summoning



Event Horizon, 1992
MS-DOS

The best way to describe *The Summoning* is "*Dungeon Master* meets *Ultima*", which is little wonder given the track record of its developer. Event Horizon's first game, *DarkSpyre* (1990) was basically a single-character *Dungeon Master* clone infused with Roguelike elements. Its second title, *Dusk of the Gods* (1991), was an open-world action RPG based on a very thorough recreation of Norse mythology, with *Ultima*-like gameplay.

The Summoning meshes these influences and past experiences into a solid single-character dungeon crawler. Your character can be fully generated or chosen from a couple dozen premade ones. Character development is somewhat innovative, featuring both combat and magic skills that improve with use, and the more traditional experience levels.

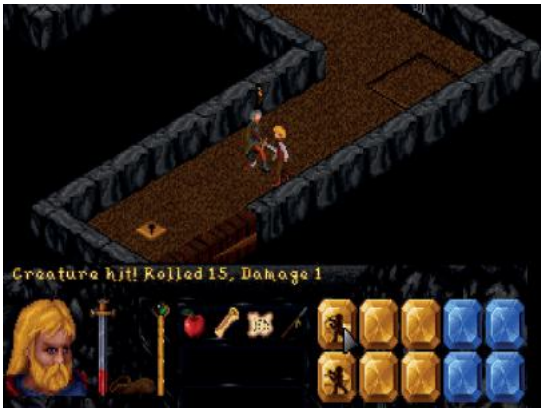
The gameplay is very similar to that in *Dungeon Master*, focusing less on combat and more on resource management and puzzle-solving. Most of the puzzles boil down to a traditional mix of pressure plates, teleporters, rolling balls, pits and key hunts. However, they are expertly designed and never grow stale – no small feat given the game's impressive length.

The game is completely set within a single dungeon, divided into several regions that are unlocked in a linear progression. Within these regions there's a lot of interconnectivity between the levels, as well as a few alternative paths and optional areas.

But where *The Summoning* shines is in its story. On your way through the dungeon, you'll meet many characters and learn a lot about both your enemies and your benefactors, as well as the world in general. The game features not one, but two shocking twists – that is, in the best-case scenario.

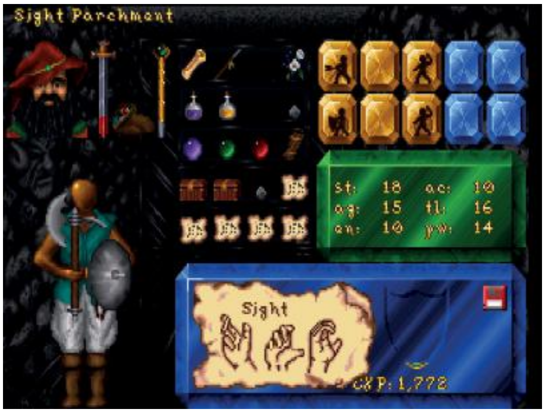
There are three basic endings and one hidden true ending. Which one you get is entirely determined by one or two choices made directly before the end. However, those are presented not as dialogue options, but as puzzles, which you can only solve successfully if you paid careful attention to the lore.

The Summoning does not shy away from its roots, at times blatantly copying gameplay elements. However the result of combining two vastly different styles is a unique and very entertaining game, more than deserving of being placed among the classics. **VK**



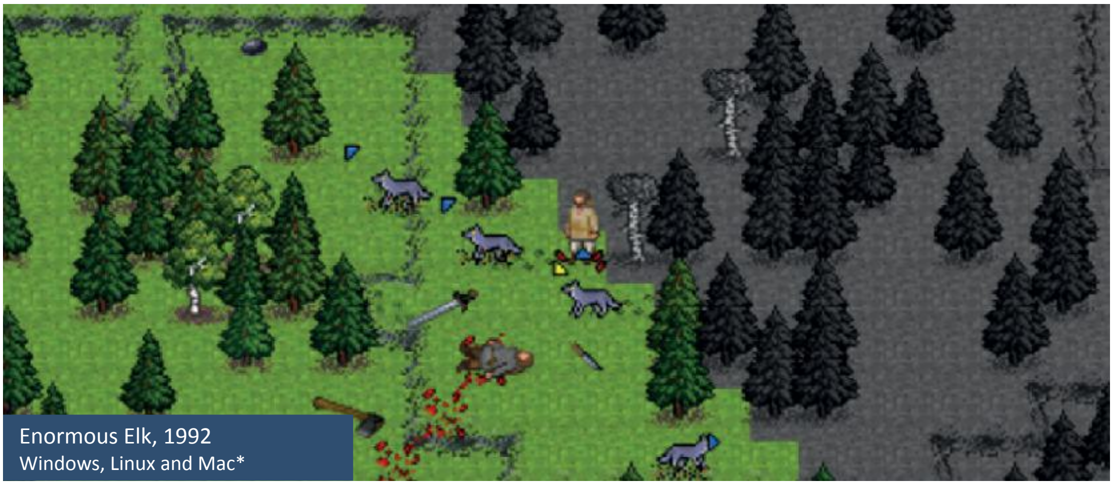
Creature hit! Rolled 15, Damage 1

Combat is in real time, and positioning is key; weapons have different attacks, but break often, so use them carefully



You learn spells by collecting scrolls that contain the combination of hand gestures necessary to cast them, like in *Dungeon Master*

UnReal World



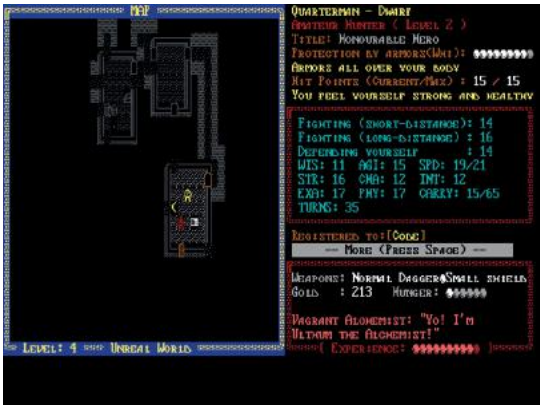
Enormous Elk, 1992
Windows, Linux and Mac*

The survival genre is a popular staple of games today, but the skeletons for titles like *The Long Dark* (2014) and *The Forest* (2014) were made long ago. In fact, one of them continues to shamble along since its birth in 1992, still receiving updates from creators Sami Maaranen and Erkka Lehmus.

***UnReal World* began development in 1990 and was released as shareware in 1992. In 2016 it began to be sold on Steam, but you can still freely download older versions on the game's website.**

UnReal World is a 2D survival Roguelike set in the early Iron Age of Finland, utilising research into authentic ancient tribal techniques to frame its gameplay mechanics. While at one point in conceptualisation the game had elements of fantasy and *D&D*-style adventure, its current vision is more grounded in realism.

Hunting animals in a game like *Minecraft* is a short, minutes-long process of simply killing an animal, collecting its meat, and then throwing it onto a fire for cooking. A hunt in *UnReal World* could involve days of hunting by following the tracks of migrating animals, or constructing resource-intensive walls of traps to drive prey into. Every part of the kill can be used, from harvesting the skin and fur, to cleaning the bones, and then collecting the meat for consumption. Meat will need to be stored in constructed underground stores or be preserved in various other ways to prevent rotting.



```
Quarterman - Dwarf
Amateur Hunter ( Level 2 )
Title: Honourable Hero
Protection by armors(Wht): ●●●●●●●●●
Armors all over your body
Hit Points (Current/Max) : 15 / 15
You feel yourself strong and healthy

 Fighting (short-distance): 14
 Fighting (long-distance) : 16
 Defending yourself       : 14
 WIS: 11  AGI: 15  SPD: 19/21
 STR: 16  CHA: 12  INT: 12
 EXA: 17  PHY: 17  CARRY: 15/65
 TURNS: 35

Registered to:[Code]
   -- More (Press Space) --

Weapons: Normal Dagger&Small shield
Gold   : 213   Hunger: ●●●●●●

Vagrant Alchemist: "Yo! I'm
Ultham the Alchemist!"
-----( Experience: ●●●●●●●●●● )-----
```

The first few versions of *UnReal World* were very different, with traditional Roguelike staples such as fantasy races, dungeons and potions

Your proficiency in these matters is determined by a vast array of skills introduced during character creation, though these will improve over time with their use in the game. With better skill comes more resources successfully collected, and at a faster pace, which has significant effects when several hours of in-game time can pass during a task as simple as making a fallen tree into a usable log.

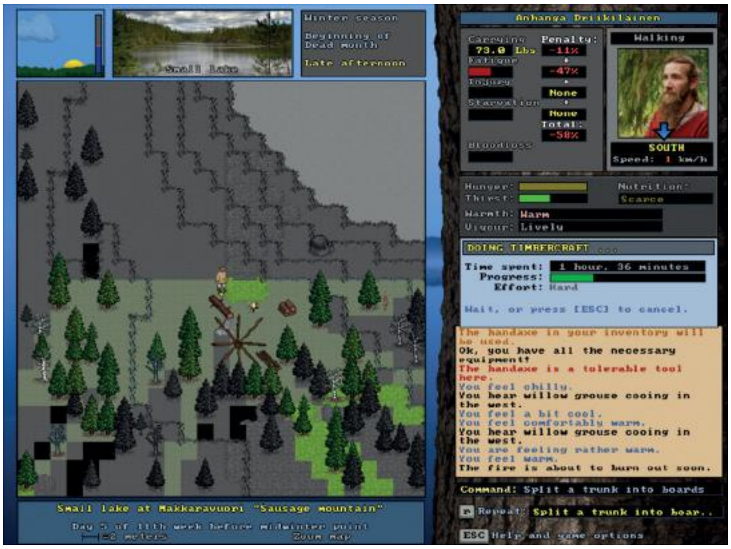
This is simply a taste of *UnReal World*'s philosophy for your interactions with it, and its difficult and unforgiving nature continues to have a reputation in Roguelike communities, as the time investment *UnReal World* requires to become comfortable is significant.

While the game currently remains exclusively single-player, the player is not alone in the world, with multiple tribes and wandering foreign merchants to be found on occasion. These can be interacted with to a similar level of depth, and quests can be completed to gain items or sometimes reputation in a village.

Currency is never awarded, as it doesn't exist in the game; bartering revolves around deciding what makes for a fair trade, and giving or receiving extra items can only help to improve your standing. Of course, the player can, in contrast, make war with neighbouring villages. Foreign merchants can be sources of rare materials like iron weapons and armour that the locals cannot make, and with the right skills and preparation it's possibly to completely dominate a village for its land and spoils.

Additionally, companion AI is also available to travel with you and assist with daily tasks of construction and survival, and AI improvements remain a large development focus of the game. Most recently, version 3.6 added wandering NPCs also hunting throughout the setting and opening new opportunities for collaborative or hostile interaction.

> "*Dwarf Fortress* and *Unreal World*, and many other long-term Roguelikes, probably seem quite odd to new players, but we can't help it. I've often received feedback from players who tried it a decade ago when they were in their teens, saying they didn't understand the game at all and it was unappealing. Ten years later they find it again, are completely sold and get playing. These bigger-than-life game projects may appeal to a more mature audience. They aren't the easiest games to comprehend – nor to play."
>
> – *Sami Maaranen,* Unreal World*'s co-creator*



Winter season
Beginning of Dead month
Late afternoon
Small lake
Anhanga Oreikilainen
Carrying 73.0 Lbs
Penalty: -11%
Fatigue -47%
Injury None
Starvation None
Total: -58%
Bloodloss
Walking
SOUTH
Speed: 1 km/h
Hunger:
Thirst:
Nutrition: Scarce
Warmth: Warm
Vigour: Lively
Small lake at Makkaravuori "Sausage mountain"
Day 5 of 11th week before midwinter point
Zoom map

DOING TIMBERCRAFT ...
Time spent: 1 hour, 36 minutes
Progress:
Effort: Hard
Wait, or press [ESC] to cancel.

The handaxe in your inventory will be used.
Ok, you have all the necessary equipment!
The handaxe is a tolerable tool here.
You feel chilly.
You hear willow grouse cooing in the west.
You feel a bit cool.
You feel comfortably warm.
You hear willow grouse cooing in the west.
You are feeling rather warm.
You feel warm.
The fire is about to burn out soon.
Command: Split a trunk into boards
r Repeat: Split a trunk into boar..
ESC Help and game options

Actions such as chopping trunks into firewood or building a shelter can take a very long time, and exhaust you if your skills or tools are poor, or if you are cold, hungry or hurt

UnReal World receives a few updates per year, and the website for the game publicly shows the development list for additions to implement, such as rideable horses, musical instruments, the ability to marry and have children who will succeed you, and even NPCs having seasonal rituals, feasts and life-cycle rites.

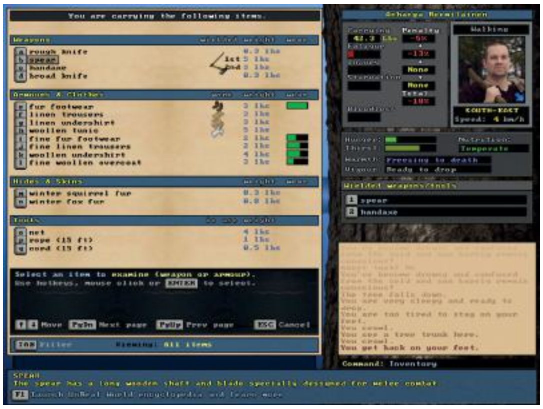
This development list itself has grown organically over the decades, and as technology and the skill of the developers have progressed new directions to take the game have become available. The aforementioned fantasy elements were not scrapped entirely, and a system of "magic" revolving around superstitious rituals was overhauled in version 3.5 in 2018.

However, instead of shooting lightning out of your hands or obliterating orcs with fireballs, this too remains grounded in old mythological beliefs. *UnReal World* magic is dipping your rod in a water hole before fishing to improve your chances of a catch, or only wearing mittens when setting snares for rabbits.

While veteran players will understand how to work the old magic, those new to the experience will wonder if these practices are doing anything at all. You could be enchanting an item you own, or you could effectively be holding the B-button down in a *Pokémon* game hoping it'll help the catch succeed.

The interface is archaic to say the least and there's a daunting number of controls, revolving entirely around keyboard hotkeys and keys to activate new keys. The graphics have undergone improvement over the years, but remain similarly ancient as well. Within moments of starting play, anyone with even minimal videogame knowledge will be able to see where multiple improvements are sorely needed in controlling it.

Yet the experience of *UnReal World* remains a completely unique and engaging one, and allows freedom, depth and options that many more modern games with significantly higher budgets have failed to come within a stone's throw of. **MA**



Weapons
Armours & Clothes
Hides & Skins
Tools
Walking
SOUTH-EAST
Speed: 4 km/h
Nutrition: Temperate
Warmth: Freezing to death
Vigour: Ready to drop
Wielded weapons/tools

You are carrying the following items.

a rough knife
b spear
c handaxe
d broad knife
e fur footwear
f linen trousers
g linen undershirt
h woollen tunic
i fine fur footwear
j fine linen trousers
k woollen undershirt
l fine woollen overcoat
m winter squirrel fur
n winter fox fur
o net
p rope (15 ft)
q cord (15 ft)

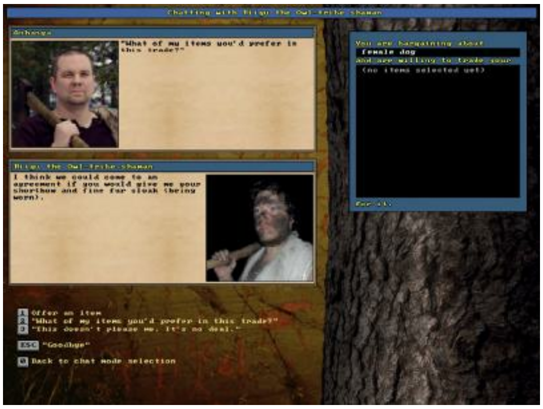
Select an item to examine (weapon or armour).
Use hotkeys, mouse click or ENTER to select.

1 spear
2 handaxe

The tree falls down.
You get back on your feet.
Command: Inventory

SPEAR
The spear has a long wooden shaft and blade specially designed for melee combat

There are currently no hit points in the game; your health is based on injuries and penalties such as hunger, cold or encumbrance



Chatting with Miigu the Owl-tribe shaman
Anhanga
Miigu the Owl-tribe shaman

"What of my items you'd prefer in this trade?"

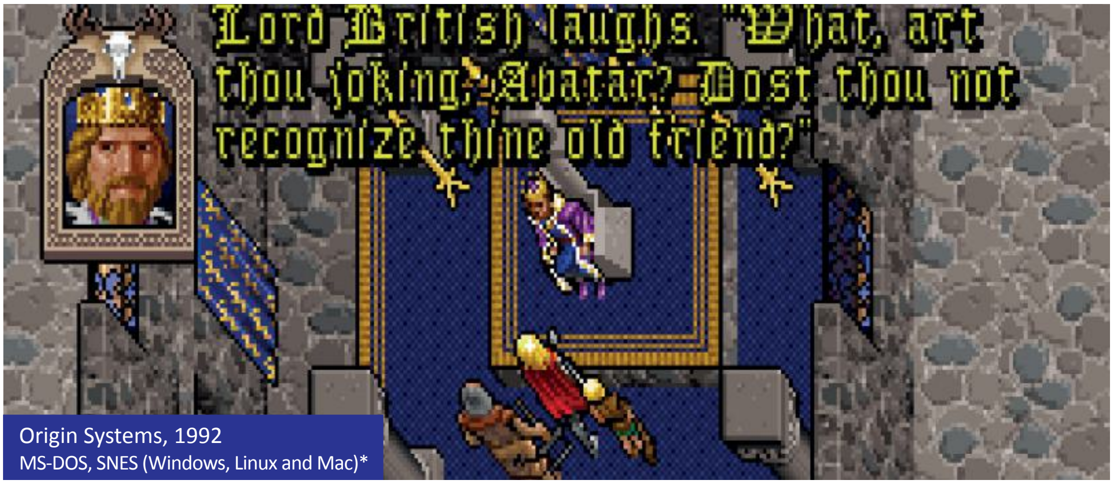
I think we could come to an agreement if you would give me your shortbow and fine fur cloak (being worn).

You are bargaining about
female dog
and are willing to trade your
(no items selected yet)

1 Offer an item
2 "What of my items you'd prefer in this trade?"
3 "This doesn't please me. It's no deal."
ESC "Goodbye"
0 Back to chat mode selection

Since the game is set in a time period before currency existed, all trade is based on bargaining with other characters

Ultima VII:
The Black Gate


Lord British laughs. "What, art thou joking, Avatar? Dost thou not recognize thine old friend?"

Origin Systems, 1992
MS-DOS, SNES (Windows, Linux and Mac)*

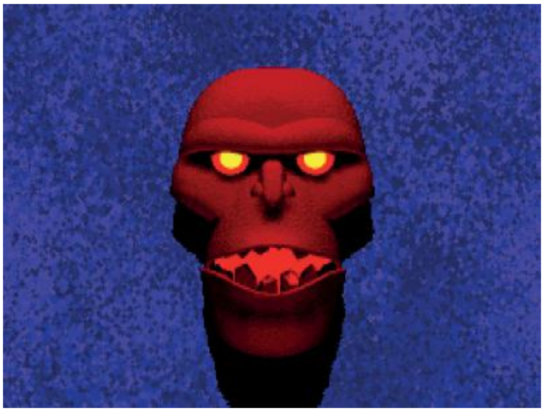
***Modders created the *Exult* project, which allows you to play *Ultima VII* on modern PCs, with several new features like higher resolution, a status bar and using *Serpents Isle*'s inventory in *The Black Gate*.**

"Avatar! Know that Britannia has entered into a new age of enlightenment. Know that the time has come for the one true Lord of Britannia to take his place at the head of his people! Under my guidance, Britannia will flourish. And all the people shall rejoice and pay homage to their new Guardian!

Know that you, too, shall kneel before me, Avatar. You too, shall soon acknowledge my authority, for I shall be your companion, your provider – and your master!"

As the red face mocked me with a menacing laugh and began to sink back into the blue static background, I was shocked. In most games, the antagonist just sits on the sidelines, but in *Ultima VII* the Guardian shows up right at the start, tells you his intent and then taunts you throughout the entire game.

Anyone who has played through *Ultima VII* can tell you what an immersive, amazing journey it is. Quite a few things set it apart, including its story. As the Avatar, you return to Britannia, meet your friend Iolo and learn of the brutal murder of a blacksmith and his gargoyle companion. Your first objective, then, is to solve the mystery behind this tragedy.



The Guardian speaks directly to you, then constantly taunts you during the game, pointing out that you're going in the wrong direction or that a party member just died

It's a very different experience from those in RPGs where you just need to out-kill monsters to get a shiny new weapon. In the *Ultima* series people matter. Their dialogue is not something to be skipped so you can just get on with the game. The text is something to be savoured, like a compelling book.

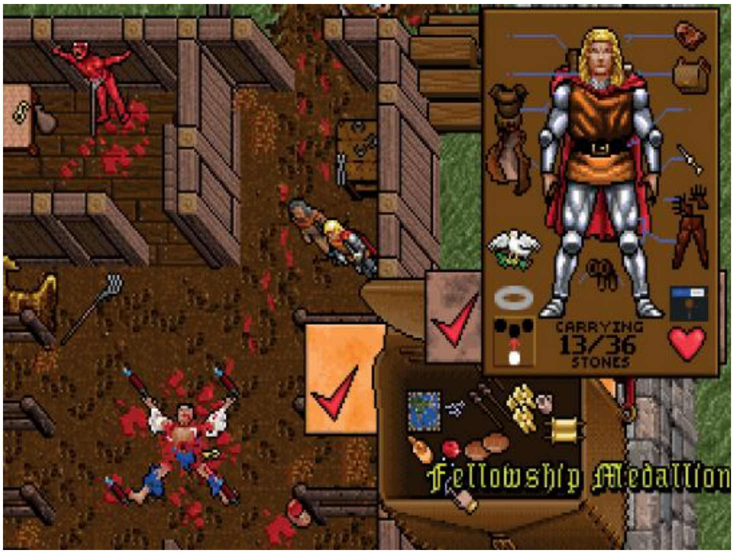
Eventually, the trail leads you out of the starting city of Trinsic, to Paws, then Britain, and from there you can head wherever you want. However, Britannia has become a much darker place since your last visit, so adultery, drug abuse and class struggles are just a few of the more mature themes you will find.

Adding to the immersion is the clean and fully mouse-driven interface. Gone are the list of keyboard commands needed to play – walking, talking, picking up items, opening your inventory, moving objects around, etc. It's all done with a click of the mouse. Also gone are the stiff dialogues based on typing "name", "job", "bye" and other keywords. Now you just have to click on the dialogue options that appear on-screen.

Another aspect is the sheer amount of detail that went into *Ultima VII*'s world. Not only in the dialogues and secrets, but in the simulation of the world itself. Want to make bread? Cut the grain, grind it into flour, add water to make dough, then pop it into the oven. Now you have bread. You can also shear sheep and make cloth, forge your own sword, go fishing, pile up crates to climb, get a job as farmer, etc.

I obviously enjoy *Ultima VII* immensely, but it does have its flaws. One of them is the combat. It's real-time and mostly automatic – you basically just toggle between "peace" and "combat" modes. The frustration sets in when you go into combat mode and everyone in your party runs off-screen. In a dungeon this usually means at least one character will die, no matter how high their level.

> “In many ways, *The Black Gate* was one of the very first SIMS! That was the genius behind the engine that was created by Richard [Garriott] and Ken Demarest (lead programmer) and his team. That was the idea – to create a world you could run around in and live in. The other writers and I took great care to make each individual NPC a whole person, as much as we could.”
>
> *– Raymond Benson,*
> Ultima VII*'s lead writer*



Double-clicking on your character shows you his paper-doll image, which you can drag items onto to equip them, or remove them into the bags to store

Another flaw is that there’s no auto-eating. Use of resources is the mark of a good RPG, but when Shamino says he’s hungry I have to open up my paper doll, then his paper doll, then his backpack, click on some food and feed him – and then I walk two steps and Iolo complains he is hungry as well.

Ultima VII has an expansion, *Forge of Virtue*, which sends the Avatar to investigate the Isle of Fire. Relatively short, the game’s backstory is well-written, although it’s not on par with the main quest.

In 1993 came *Ultima VII - Part 2: Serpent Isle*. A full-length stand-alone release, it continues the events told in *Ultima VII* and *Ultima Underworld II*. The Avatar follows a villain to the eponymous Serpent Isles, which are actually the “Lands of Danger and Despair” from *Ultima I*. Shortly after leaving your ship, a magic storm switches your items and companions with other things. For example, your spell book switches place with a piece of pumice.

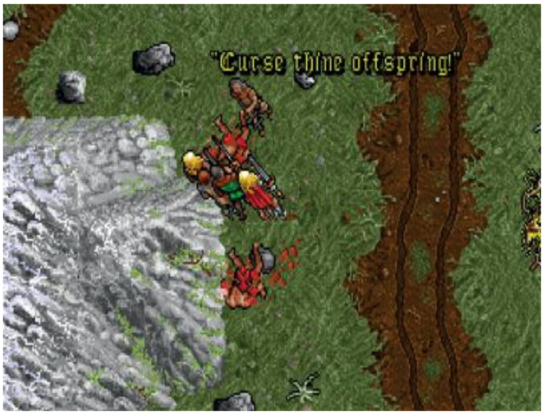
Part of the game’s premise is that you need to hunt down all of your old equipment, as well as your now-missing companions. As you explore the Isle, you will also come across three towns that have rejected the Three Principles of Truth, Love and Courage, core among the Virtues that you defined in *Ultima IV*.

Serpent Isle has a very different tone from that of other *Ultima* games, with a more linear, event-based story, and a heavy emphasis on dialogue. This displeased some old fans, but inspired many developers later.

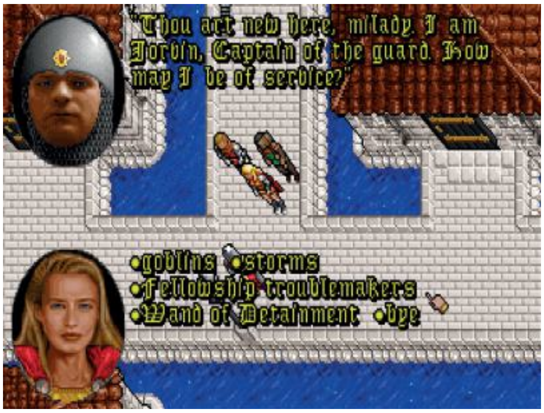
It eventually also got its own mini-expansion, *The Silver Seed* – which, oddly, came with a complete walkthrough in the box! Sadly, EA had already begun to meddle too much, and this expansion was a rushed release, with poor puzzles and a disconnected plot.

True masterpieces, both *Ultima VII* parts are well worth playing, not only to see where modern RPGs truly found their footing, but also for an incredible story that has yet to be surpassed. **DK**

***Serpent Isle* was first planned as a pirate-themed game for the *Worlds of Ultima* series. Later it became a main *Ultima* game, but, since Garriott had declared that no two *Ultima* games should use the same engine, it was released as *Ultima VII - Part 2*.**



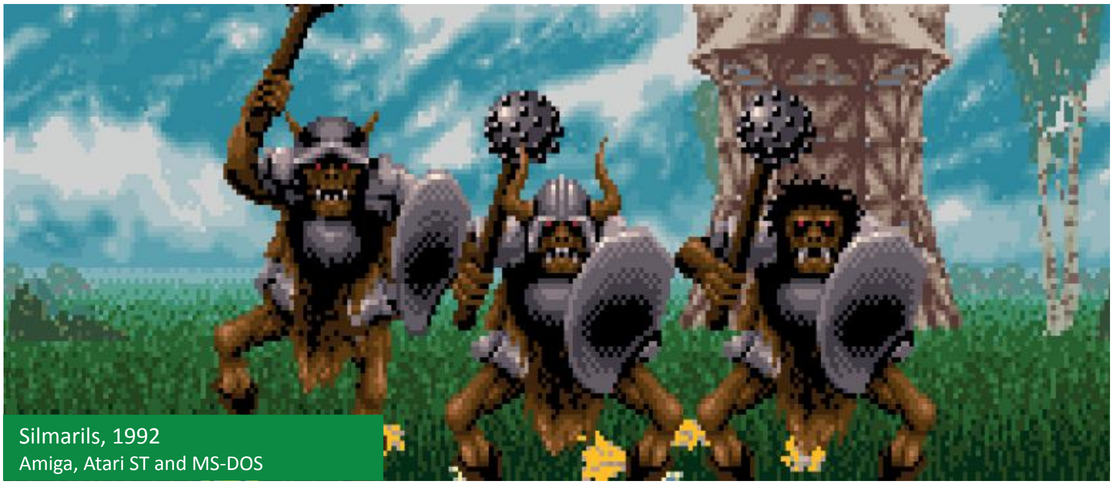
You can give orders to your party in combat, but they work more like suggestions that will be kindly ignored


"Thou art new here, milady. I am Jorvin, Captain of the guard. How may I be of service?"

- goblins
- storms
- Fellowship troublemakers
- Wand of Detainment
- bye

Serpent Isle brought improvements to the interface and a more linear story, with a very different tone

Ishar:
Legend of the Fortress

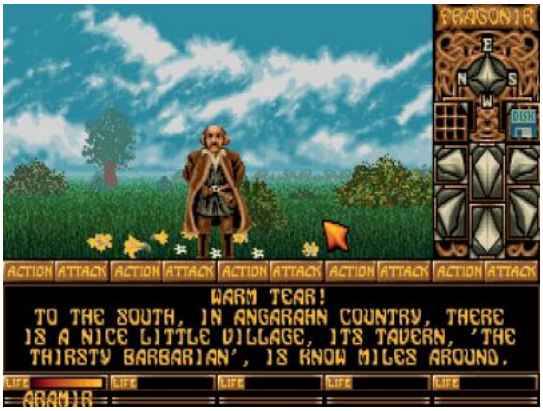

Silmarils, 1992
Amiga, Atari ST and MS-DOS

At first glance, *Ishar* appears to be one of the many games spawned by the success of the *Eye of the Beholder* series. Fortunately, it's much more than that. Silmarils, a French veteran of the Amiga scene, introduced many original ideas to the formula.

If you find *Ishar* too punishing, fan-made patches exist to remove the need to pay each time you save the game.

You start all alone in the middle of Kendoria, a vast kingdom, a bit lost too. Unlike many dungeon crawlers, *Ishar* lets you spend most of your time outside, with no indications except a big map and a simple objective: reach the fortress of Ishar to kill the evil sorcerer Khrog. A direct sequel to *Crystals of Arborea* (1990), *Ishar* doesn't require any prior knowledge of the series but offers interesting cameos.

Ishar is probably the ultimate capitalist dream, since you must pay for everything. Recruiting up to four other characters? Pay. Getting precious food and water to avoid starvation? Pay. Train your characters to grow stronger? Pay. You merely want to save? PAY. While disturbing at first, the system quickly becomes a nice way to make choices dire at every step of the adventure.



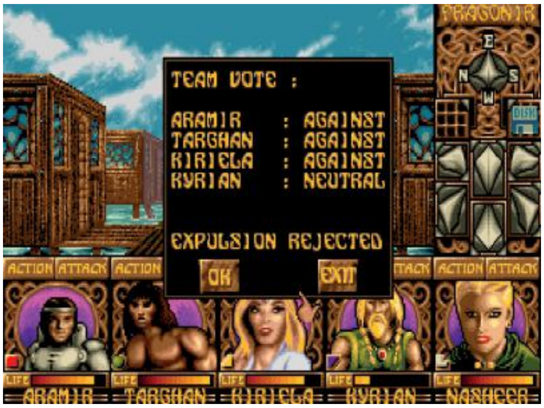
WARM TEAR!
TO THE SOUTH, IN ANGARAHN COUNTRY, THERE IS A NICE LITTLE VILLAGE, ITS TAVERN, 'THE THIRSTY BARBARIAN', IS KNOW MILES AROUND.

This friendly man, who's the first NPC you'll meet, is eager to join your party ... and run away with your items

Combat is in real time, meaning a lot of micromanagement on your end. Magic is useful and, since most classes get specific spells, you don't need to focus too much on it. Still, it can be extra-costly thanks to expensive potions to cure your characters and refill your magic. The very high fantasy-looking bestiary is well endowed and the general monster design very nice. A cool feature regarding combat in *Ishar* is the possibility to create a tactical formation for your group, protecting your spellcasters behind your more resilient warriors, for example. While a bit crude, attacks and spells are entirely animated. Curiously, enemies don't chase you but, since the game is really hard, that's a relief.

The sense of scale is probably one of the things that *Ishar* does best. Kendoria is a vast land and navigating through its wilderness takes some time. Cartography becomes vital as you step through miles and miles of marshes, forests and open plains. Silmarils has worked a long time on Amiga and excels in creating beautiful, lush nature that makes long strolls enjoyable. Strangely enough for a CRPG, there is only a handful of underground dungeons, but each one is memorable. Spending most of the game outside makes dungeons feel claustrophobic and deadly, since you can't avoid enemies anymore. Civilisation is also present through scattered villages and one gigantic city.

Adventure and dangers dwell within towns with packs of thieves and bandits, but those places also offer rest for your weary adventurers. Inns, smiths and various shops are a good way to recruit fresh blood, train your merry band or hear rumours. Additionally to the main plot, various side-quests are available through specific NPCs. For example, one of them allows you to even cross the path of the former heroes of *Crystals of Arborea*, the prequel to *Ishar*.

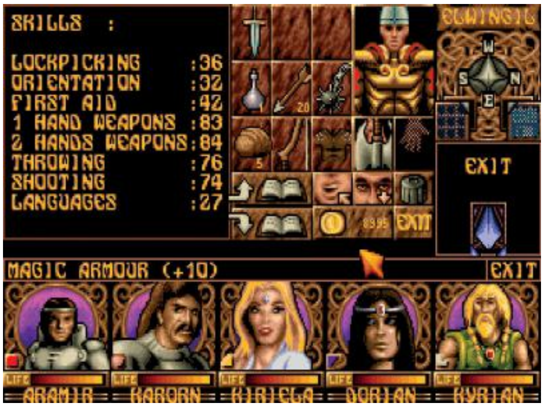


TEAM VOTE :

ARAMIR : AGAINST
TARGHAN : AGAINST
KIRIELA : AGAINST
KYRIAN : NEUTRAL

EXPULSION REJECTED

Characters will vote on key decisions; here they refuse my request to dismiss one of the party members

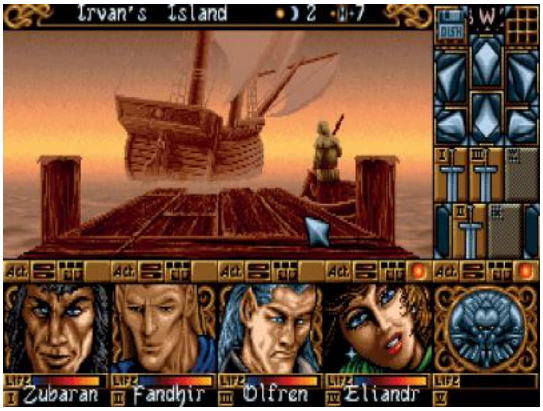


SKILLS :

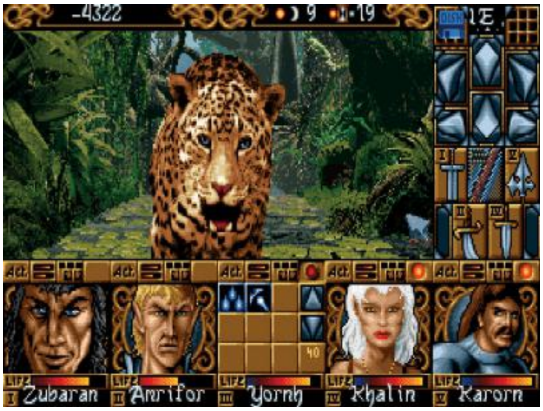
LOCKPICKING :36
ORIENTATION :32
FIRST AID :42
1 HAND WEAPONS :83
2 HANDS WEAPONS :84
THROWING :76
SHOOTING :74
LANGUAGES :27

MAGIC ARMOUR (+10)

The equipment system is simple, with a number next to the item's name showing its damage or armour value



The second game has you travelling through various islands in search of artefacts for your quest



Ishar 3 features exotic settings and some really impressive artwork, based on digitised photos

In *Ishar*, from the lowest human thief to the greatest Lizardman fighter, everyone has a voice and strong feelings about other races. Every time you want to recruit, murder or dismiss someone, a vote occurs. The outcome is democratic and characters each have their predetermined opinions. The most powerful teammates usually have the most xenophobic opinions, which can lead to dreadful consequences such as a character leaving the group or, worst-case scenario, total party kill. Having a 100% human team is weaker than other combinations but is also the safest way to control a group. Silmarils is keen to remind you about the "dog-eat-dog" nature of Kendoria, as the first recruitable NPC in the game will take your money and flee after travelling a few days with you.

Ishar is a hard and demanding game, but the satisfaction it generates and the novelty of the game make it a worthy addition to every CRPG library.

Bigger, better and less confusing, *Ishar 2: Messengers of Doom* (1993) is probably the best of the series but doesn't have the awesome Basil Poledouris soundtrack.

You now play as the new Lord of Ishar, Zubaran, who needs to kill Shandar, an evil sect leader. The second entry offers an expanded playground with an entire archipelago to explore and some major improvements. Saving is now free and a GPS indicates your location on the map. You can also import your party from the previous game. However, NPCs will send you all over the archipelago to get an object or talk to someone, so taking notes is essential.

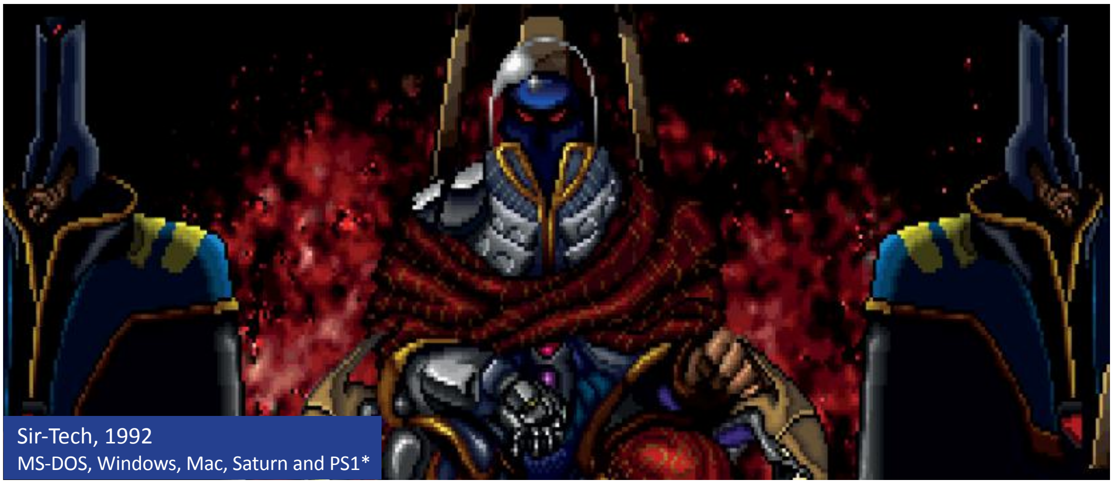
Sadly, the last game of the series, *Ishar 3: The Seven Gates of Infinity* (1994), is a disappointment. By using the Gates of Infinity, Zubaran and company time-travel to different periods, encountering new environments, monsters and NPCs. While graphically enhanced, a lot of the game feels like a retreading of *Ishar 2*, and the final battle for the fate of Ishar consists mostly of travelling back and forth between the Dragon of Sith's lair and the city to heal your wounds.

On a funny note, the game's NPCs are mostly digitised actors, like a bearded Mel Gibson or Dustin Hoffman. **TR**

A fourth game, called *Ishar: Genesis* was considered, but never got made.

Wizardry VII:

Crusaders of the Dark Savant

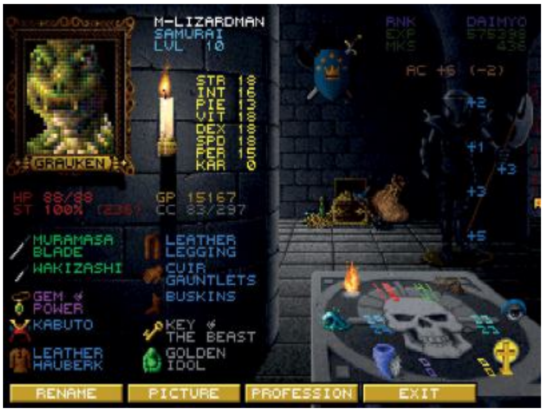


Sir-Tech, 1992
MS-DOS, Windows, Mac, Saturn and PS1*

I didn't finish *Wizardry VII* on my first try, or my second a few years later. That first attempt was right after it was published in 1992, when I was still relatively wet behind the ears when it came to computer games, having not played anything really big. *Wizardry VII* was a revelation, a massive, sprawling behemoth of a game that was easy to get lost in, in terms both of its geography and its more opaque mysteries.

The second try was an attempt to brute-force the game by sheer will, even though I wasn't enjoying myself all that much. I just wanted to beat the damn game. As the Internet (and its easily available guides) were still a year or so away, I was stopped by some of the more obstructionist puzzles. As they say, third time's the charm.

Almost entirely the brainchild of D.W. Bradley, *Wizardry VII* continued the transformation Bradley had started with its predecessor. The roots of the Greenberg/Woodhead *Wizardry* can still be seen: movement is by discrete steps from square to square – the building blocks of the world and its dungeons.



Characters can change classes at any time, if they have the required stats, and skills are now divided into three categories: Weaponry, Physical and Academia

Battles are still phase-based and mostly randomly triggered, apart from a few fixed ones. A few new spells and skills were added; lock-picking and trap-disarming were overhauled. But overall, the core system remained the same.

What Bradley ingeniously did was to transpose this refined dungeon-crawling formula into a huge, handcrafted open world, long before this was a thing.

In *Wizardry VII,* you have an entire planet to explore. And, unlike most games, you're not alone on your quest. Various other factions have joined the fray, including the eponymous Dark Savant and his robot legions, in a wild scavenger hunt for the Astral Dominae – a powerful ancient artefact.

Your objective is to find various map pieces spread all over the planet that, in theory, should help you solve various puzzles and reach your final goal. In practice, though, some of these puzzles are almost impossible to solve without the help of a guide. This is not helped by a keyword-based dialogue system that makes it easy to miss crucial hints. And there's no journal, so expect to make copious notes.

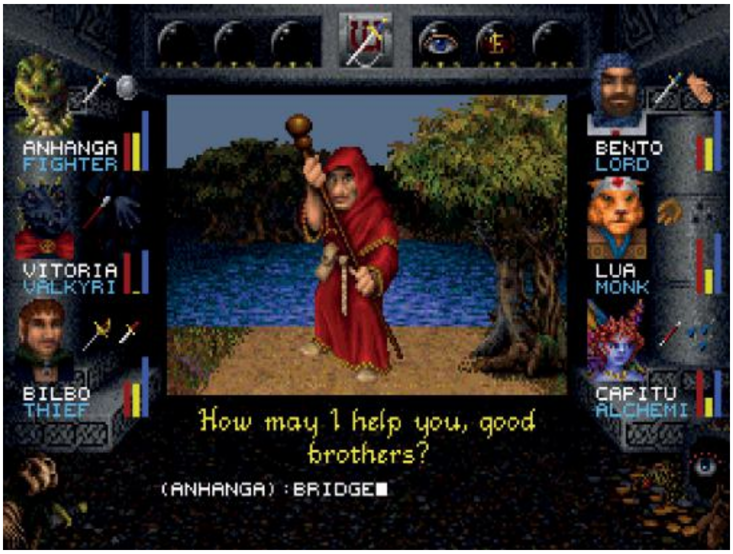
The game has six major factions you can ally with, but much more interesting are rival parties made up of individuals from those factions. Like you, they roam the planet, collecting map pieces, befriending, antagonising and fighting each other – or you – giving an overall sense of urgency and of a living game world.

To facilitate this new mechanic, the game introduced a Diplomacy skill and expanded NPC interaction options, allowing you befriend them and trade items and information. That said, while I love the concept of rival parties and expanded interactions, their implementations are far too insubstantial and fickle to be more than an illusion of world reactivity.

***Wizardry Gold*, a new version of *Wizardry VII* for Windows and Mac, was released in 1996. This version is widely considered to be inferior, due to its inconsistent graphics, poor music and frequent bugs.**

“Alas, *Crusaders* was my last *Wizardry* title. On its heels came the advent of 3D, *Doom* and real-time, and as videogames went mainstream, recognisable brand names and blowing people up commanded massive profits, while, with rare exceptions, innovation in game paradigms was costly, and all too often ended in failed titles.”

– David W. Bradley,
Wizardry VII*’s creator*



How may I help you, good brothers?

(ANHANGA):BRIDGE■

Some NPCs require specific words to be said, puzzles can be very complex and there’s no journal system, so be prepared to take lots of notes

Yet, while it may not have been great, the game tried something new that remains novel to this day, and it improved the experience most of the time.

Wizardry VII also adds automapping, though it’s skill-based and nearly useless without training. A more subtle addition is the new ground tiles for paved roads. There is only one road in the game and it connects all major locations. Together with the map, it makes orientation easy and yet feels much less condescending than modern quests’ compasses, mostly because it is still possible to get temporarily lost or have that feeling of exploration and true discovery so often lacking in modern games.

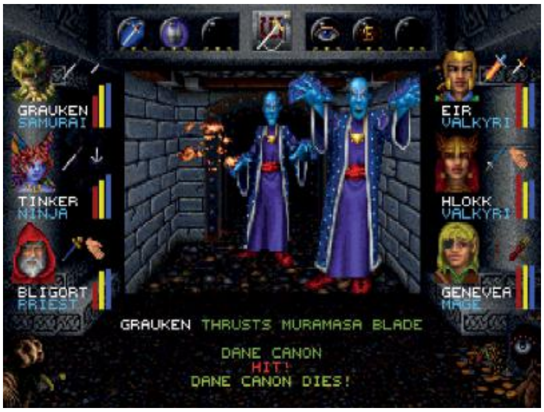
Since *Wizardry VII* takes place on a different world from the first six games’, another change comes in the new races you meet and the more-or-less creative monsters (two-headed tigers, walking octopi, etc.). Where the previous games were pure fantasy, the seventh part has a strong science fiction influence.

The sum of all these things is an experience that feels both familiar and novel at the same time. I loved discovering and learning all these new elements on my first try, and yet at the same time I loved the familiarity of playing an old-school *Wizardry* with a large and extensive overworld.

On my third attempt to play it, armed with a better understanding of the game mechanics and a way to get around the more annoying puzzles due to the availability of solutions on the Internet, I ploughed through the game and enjoyed every second of it.

Wizardry VII is a game that invites exploration. It wants you to map its world exhaustively and look into every nook and cranny. Like all the games in the series, it expects you to know how to build a strong party, but accommodates a lot of different builds and approaches. It contains an endless number of battles that can sap your energy, and yet it always makes you come back for more. **JG**

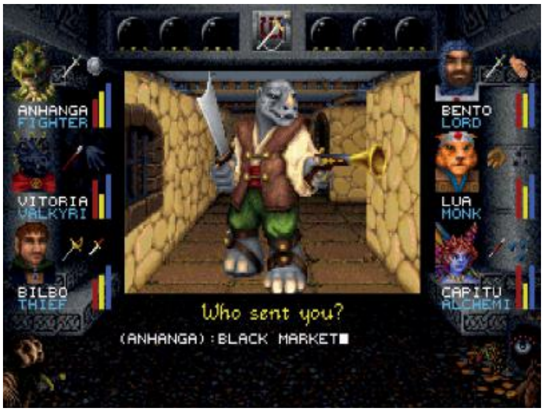
The *Automap Mod* can be used to move the game’s map to a convenient secondary window, while the *Cosmic Forge* is a pack of tools that allows much of the game to be edited.



GRAUKEN THRUSTS MURAMASA BLADE

DANE CANON
HIT!
DANE CANON DIES!

Battles are challenging and require a well-made party, but the few monster sprites can grow repetitive after a while

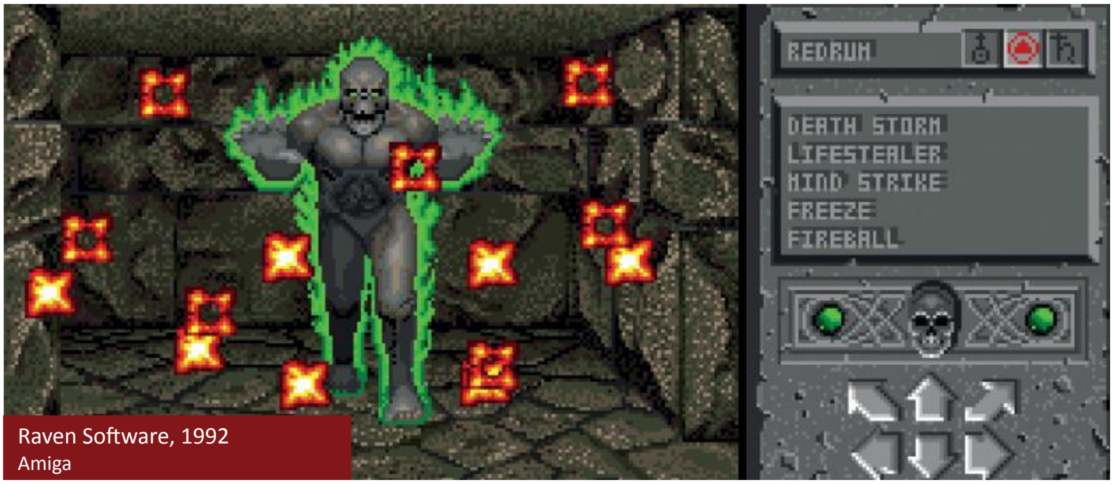


Who sent you?

(ANHANGA):BLACK MARKET■

The roaming NPC parties may find clues before you, forcing you to seek out and trade with, steal from or kill them

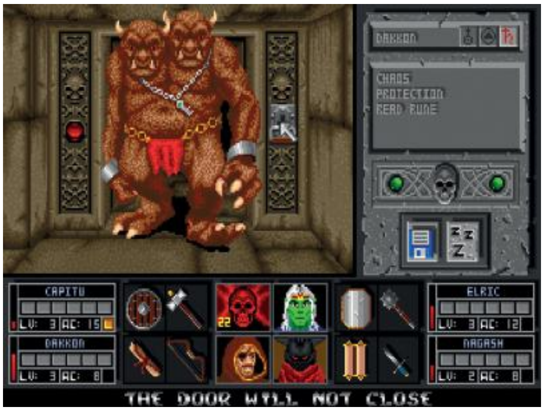
Black Crypt



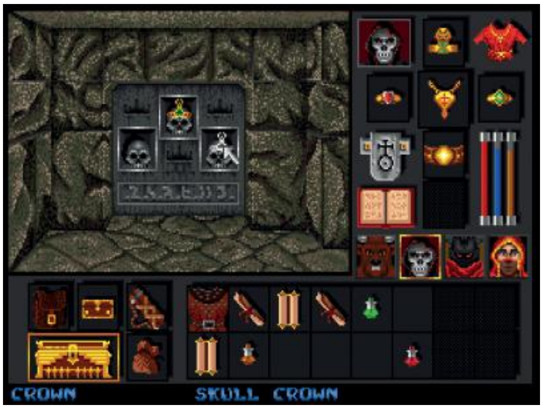
Raven Software, 1992
Amiga

Black Crypt is a dungeon crawler in the style of the classic game *Dungeon Master* (1987). It was released only on Amiga (ports for MS-DOS and SEGA Genesis were planned, but never completed), and never made the splash the (superior) *Eye of the Beholder* series did around the same time, so not many have played it. The story of the game is pretty standard 'heroes must defeat the evil villain' fare, but it works alright for this genre and time.

***Black Crypt* was the first game by Raven Software. Years later they became famous for developing *Hexen* and several *Call of Duty* titles.**



Enemies can be brutal, but most won't respawn, so you can clear the level of monsters and focus on the puzzles



Black Crypt has challenging puzzles with invisible plates, teleporters, deadly traps and fake hints, but was sold with a clue book and maps inside the manual

You take control of a party of four (fighter, cleric, druid, wizard). Those classes are set and cannot be changed, though you can edit portrait, names and stats. These stats have very clear min/max 'best' values for each class, so there is not much actual choice there.

Black Crypt has a heavy focus on puzzle-solving and careful exploration, less so on battles. Combat is rather simple, click to attack, choose spells to memorize and then cast. Wait for spells to replenish, sleep, eat, drink to keep your party fit and heal them as required. There are keys to find for unlocking doors, teleporters to use, trapdoors to fall through, illusory walls, secret buttons, pressure plates, traps, forcefields, scrolls with hints (or lies) to read, equipment to gain – all the solid staples of the genre. Every set of levels and monsters has a distinct feel and theme to it, and many enemies can't be defeated before you've puzzled out their weakness, usually by exploring the levels thoroughly.

The game has a few neat features, such as an automap spell and remappable keys. It also features varying dungeon tile graphics and a good mix of original monsters. As in other dungeon crawlers, there is some use of 3D audio, so that you can hear from whence a monster approaches. This creates some simple but, for the time, great immersion.

What is less stellar about the game is somewhat-cumbersome inventory handling and a very shoddy manual – you'll have to guess at what the stats of characters are good for and you won't know what items do relative to each other except by trying them out and getting a feel for whether a Hopeblade is better than say, an Axe +2.

All in all, *Black Crypt* will appeal to gamers who like the genre. Sure, it's a clone with few innovations, but it is also a well-made game in its own right. **CH**

Shadowlands

SHADOWLANDS

Teque London, 1992
Atari ST, Amiga and MS-DOS

Shadowlands. For most people, it's the title of an Anthony Hopkins movie about the writer C.S. Lewis. But, to me, it recalls all the time I enjoyed inside dungeons, accompanied by four adventurers with Japanese manga-style faces. It's the name of what is – without a doubt – one of my favourite RPGs.

A 3D, real-time isometric world awaits the four heroes chosen to avenge Prince Vashnar and defeat the mighty Overlord. Before reaching him, you have to define the heroes, characterised by four basic attributes: Combat, Magic, Strength and Health.

Expanding upon *Drakkhen* (1989), *Shadowlands* was created so as to allow players to control the four heroes either individually or as a group. Today this may sound trivial, but at the time it was a real revolution in RPGs. Until then there were basically two systems: either the group moved and acted together, or there was a lone hero, typically in a top-down view.

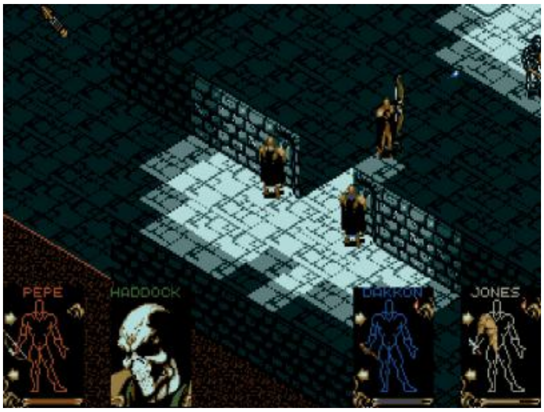
The ability to spread the members of your party and control them individually opened new combat and puzzle possibilities. Walking in a line isn't the same as advancing as a block to face an enemy, for example. It was a strategic dimension entirely new to RPGs.

But, without a doubt, the most challenging and fun aspect of the game is its puzzles. Besides the usual key-and-locks, sliding blocks and pressure plates, *Shadowlands* added puzzles that use light. A system called Photoscope makes every light source – static or mobile – illuminate the environment in real-time, fading with distance and creating multiple levels of shadow. This was cleverly used to introduce puzzles that require a certain level of light to be activated.

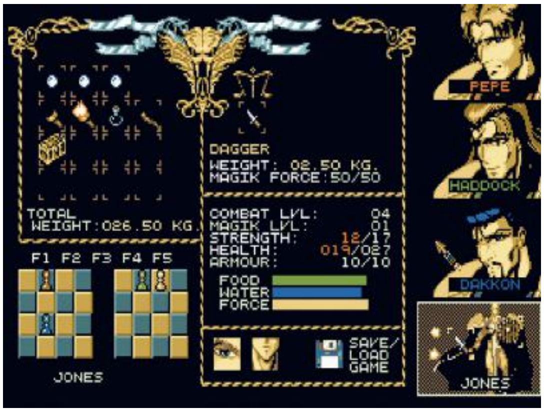
There's little to say about the other elements of the game. The plot is simple and linear: basically an excuse to introduce a series of dungeons, packed with monsters to kill and traps to solve.

The graphics aren't very attractive either, and offer little variety in the allegedly different environments. While the game's theme song is memorable and eerie, there's no music in-game, and barely any sound effects.

In the end, *Shadowlands* was a revolutionary game in two aspects: the individual control of heroes and the use of Photoscope. The game also had a sequel called *Shadoworlds* (1992), set in space and using the same engine, but without the same attractiveness. **FHG**

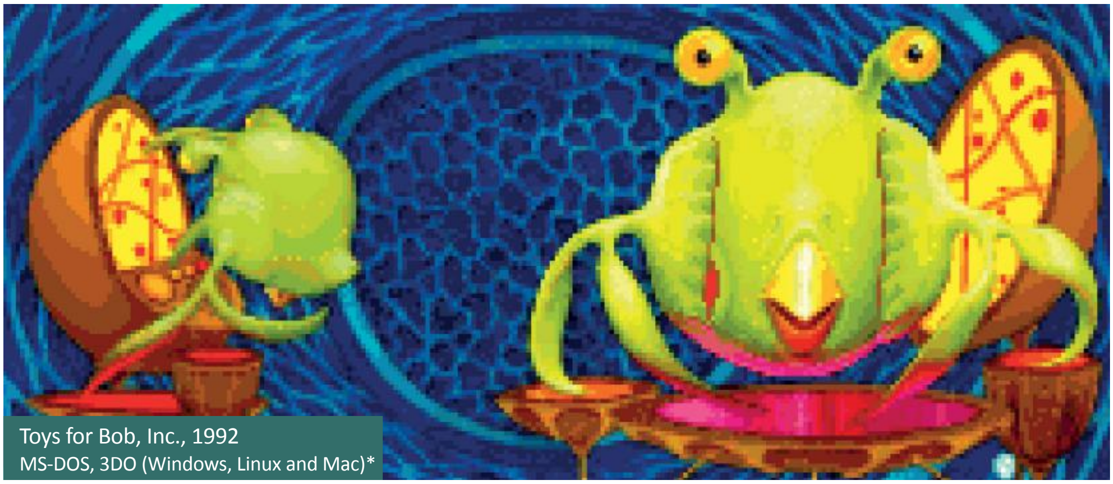


You control each character by clicking on his body parts, such as clicking the right arm to interact with objects or on the leg to walk


DAGGER
WEIGHT: 02.50 KG.
MAGIK FORCE:50/50
TOTAL
WEIGHT:026.50 KG.
COMBAT LVL: 04
MAGIK LVL: 01
STRENGTH: 12/17
HEALTH: 019/027
ARMOUR: 10/10

You roll the stats and customise the appearances of four characters; each can only equip two items at a time, but the game allows you to split the party into two groups

Star Control 2



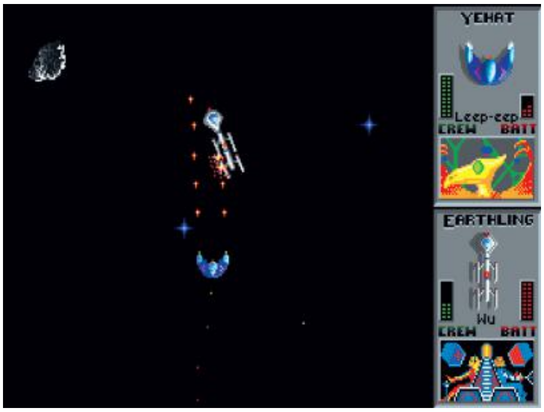
Toys for Bob, Inc., 1992
MS-DOS, 3DO (Windows, Linux and Mac)*

When I'm asked what my favourite CRPG is, people are often surprised when I answer that it's *Star Control 2*. "That's an adventure game," they reply. Oh, but *Star Control 2* is so much more than that!

***In 2002 the source code of *SC2* was released. Fans then started *The Ur-Quan Masters* project, to port the game to modern PCs.**

You control a ship that starts off as a bare-bones hull, and as you acquire resources and credits, you can buy upgrades to improve your ship, as well as gain new crew and landing craft to replace any that were lost in battles and exploration. These features are direct analogues of the skills, items and hit points in a typical role-playing game, making *Star Control 2* more a CRPG than an adventure game. And like any good CRPG, *Star Control 2* offers three areas of activity for the player: exploration, storyline and combat.

The area for you to explore in *Star Control 2* is huge. It's nothing less than a whole galactic arm (and then some), with hundreds of star systems. While a minority of these systems are important to the game's storyline, most of them contain valuable resources that can be harvested by landing probes. You'll find everything from minerals and lifeforms to special items needed to advance the storyline.



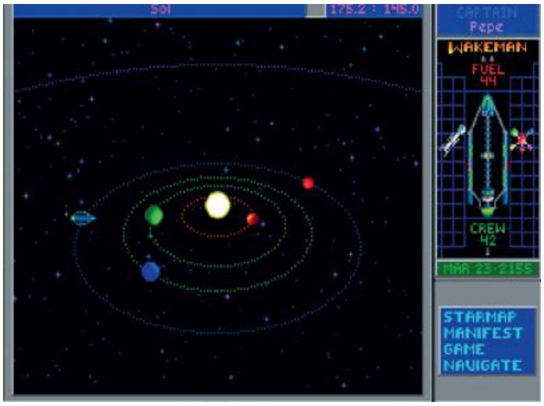
Combat is similar to that in *Asteroid*, but each of the various ships plays differently

To me, one of the most amazing things about *Star Control 2* is that the explorable area is entirely open and free-form. True, you are limited in your exploration radius by your fuel reserves, but within that restriction you can go anywhere. The dialogue you have with main characters often gives you clues on where to go, but you are free to ignore that advice and go anywhere you want.

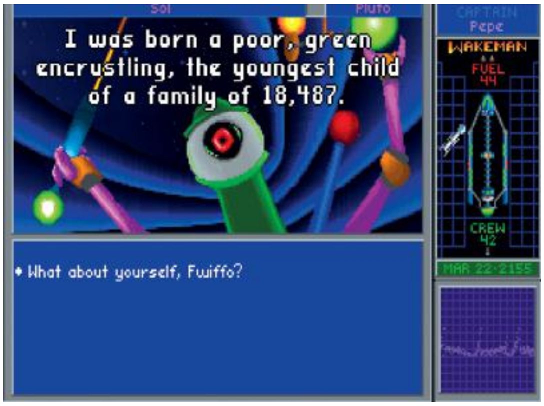
As in any CRPG, there are some areas that need to be unlocked before you can visit them (or get any results from visiting them). The best example of this is QuasiSpace, the strange dimension that the Arilou Lalee'lay race comes from. Portals into QuasiSpace are randomly scattered around the galactic arm, and you are eventually granted the ability to enter it at will by using a Portal Spawner that you can create from pieces found on a wrecked enemy ship. But until that time, many distant systems are difficult to reach, and some are downright impossible.

The universe of *Star Control 2* is filled with many races, and conversations with those races are varied and always humorous (if darkly so). Most races have a unique perspective, ranging from the insult-flinging Pkunk through the depressed Utwig to the mysterious, multidimensional Orz. Dialogue with representatives of these races can be hilarious and confusing, but is needed to advance the plot.

The pacing of the game was remarkably well-controlled by the designers, especially given the open-ended nature of the playspace. New races are found regularly, and each one gives you additional information about the history of the conflict in the region, as well as hints on where to go next and even new avenues of exploration. It always feels like there is somewhere to go and something to do that's important to advance the story.



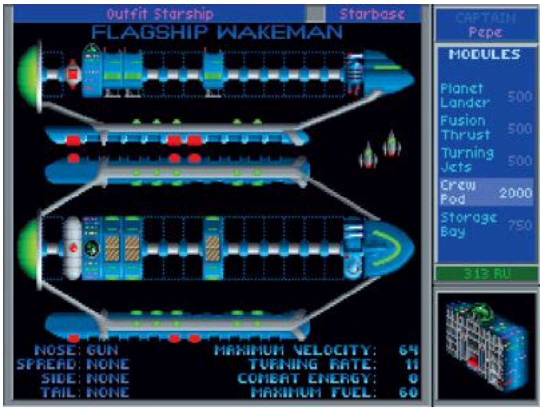
There are hundreds of systems to explore, ranging from our own solar system to other dimensions



I was born a poor, green encrustling, the youngest child of a family of 18,487.

• What about yourself, Fuiffo?

Engaging in conversation with any of the numerous alien species in *Star Control 2* is always amusing

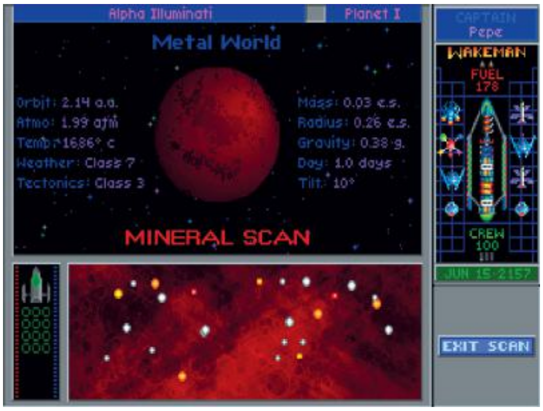


Planet Lander 500
Fusion Thrust 500
Turning Jets 500
Crew Pod 2000
Storage Bay 750

NOSE: GUN
SPREAD: NONE
SIDE: NONE
TAIL: NONE

MAXIMUM VELOCITY: 64
TURNING RATE: 11
COMBAT ENERGY: 0
MAXIMUM FUEL: 60

At the Starbase, you can upgrade your flagship, trade resources, recruit crew members and buy new ships



Orbit: 2.14 a.u.
Atmo: 1.99 atm
Temp: 1686° c
Weather: Class 7
Tectonics: Class 3

Mass: 0.03 e.s.
Radius: 0.26 e.s.
Gravity: 0.38 g.
Day: 1.0 days
Tilt: 10°

When landing on planets you must weigh up the danger of hazards such as electrical storms and intense heat

The storyline of *Star Control 2* unfolds over time, as you explore the stars and speak with the races you discover. Some are friendly and some are not, which leads to one of the best features of the game: the combat system.

Combat in *Star Control 2* is nothing short of fantastic. Each race has its own ship, with unique weapons, defences and propulsion. The ships fight in a 2D top-down arena reminiscent of the old arcade games *Space War* and *Asteroid*. Some ships have powerful but short-range weapons, while others have self-guided attack missiles, and others have inertia-less propulsion and can literally turn on a dime. The crew on your ship act as its "hit points", because successful strikes will kill crew members and the ship is destroyed when all crew are dead. One ship even uses its own crew to power its weapons!

Each combat consists of one ship fighting one ship. Like the old rock-paper-scissors game, some ships can handily defeat other ships, but, unlike in RPS, a highly skilled player can sometimes overcome a deficiency in a ship's capabilities.

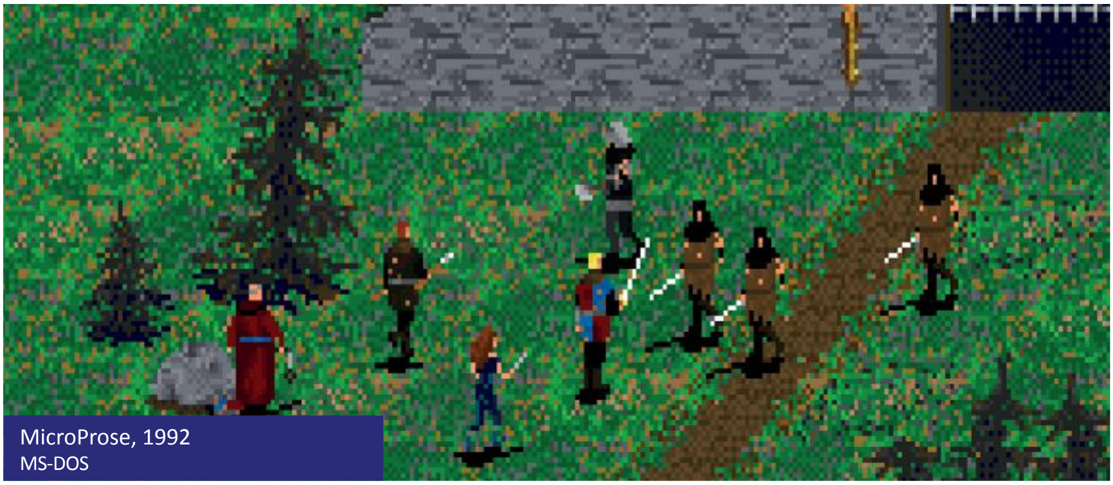
And with over two dozen races, by the end of the game there is a huge variety of ship types to choose from, not counting the player's own flagship, which is itself uniquely upgraded.

Each race also has its own music, which plays during its dialogue, and this music was based in MOD format, using digitised samples of instruments to play the notes, which are stored independently of the samples and in a much smaller format. This allowed for wildly varying music between races, but without the large computational overhead (in 1994 terms) of 100% digitised music like an MP3. At the time, *Star Control 2* had some of the best-sounding music of any game on the market, and that music helped define the tone of each race that you encountered in the game.

Since its release in 1992, *Star Control 2* has been considered one of the best computer games ever developed, and, for me, it remains my favourite CRPG of all time. You can see its influence in the open-endedness of *Fallout* and *Arcanum*, and I will always remember this game fondly. Thank you, Toys for Bob, for making such an amazing game! **TC**

Toys for Bob was acquired by Activision in 2005. Fred Ford and Paul Reiche III, the creators of *Star Control*, went on to create the popular *Skylanders* games. The *Star Control* licence was bought by Stardock, who released *Star Control: Origins* in 2018.

Darklands



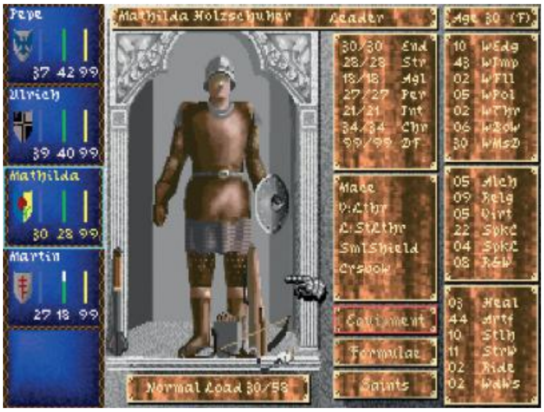
MicroProse, 1992
MS-DOS

***Darklands* comes with an extensive 110-page manual that is required to play the game and even includes detailed historical background on life in the Holy Roman Empire.**

Ominously opening with a warning that "in Medieval Germany, reality is more horrifying that fantasy", *Darklands* keeps its word, whether the horror is a child-gobbling Satanist or just the tedium of digging your scabbed and beaten body out of jail with a spoon. Despite its age, the unique mix of Choose-Your-Own-Adventure progression, immersive historical setting and classless builds make *Darklands* a refreshing and original experience.

Set in the 15th-century Holy Roman Empire, *Darklands* covers a large swath of medieval Europe and portrays Greater Germany in the full glory of its grim day-to-day survival, arbitrary law enforcers and superstitious beliefs both rampant and fantastic. The game world itself is history come to life, thorough and well-researched. Dialogue and exploration choices are littered with Germanic linguistics, and beautiful pixel art depicts lush medieval scenes with accuracy and detail.

With a setting so rich and detailed, it is fitting that *Darklands* is an open-world RPG, encouraging free exploration from the start while you slowly unravel your ultimate goal: avert an apocalyptic disaster.



The character system is classless and extensive, with seven different weapon skills and twelve non-combat ones, such as Stealth, Alchemy and Religion

From character creation on, the game is admirably committed to the time period, with a system that raises characters from infancy to adulthood with a multitude of options for occupations and backgrounds commonly found in medieval Europe, each adjusting the stats and skills in minor ways. If it's your dream to role-play a country commoner turned alchemist turned hermit, this is a game for you.

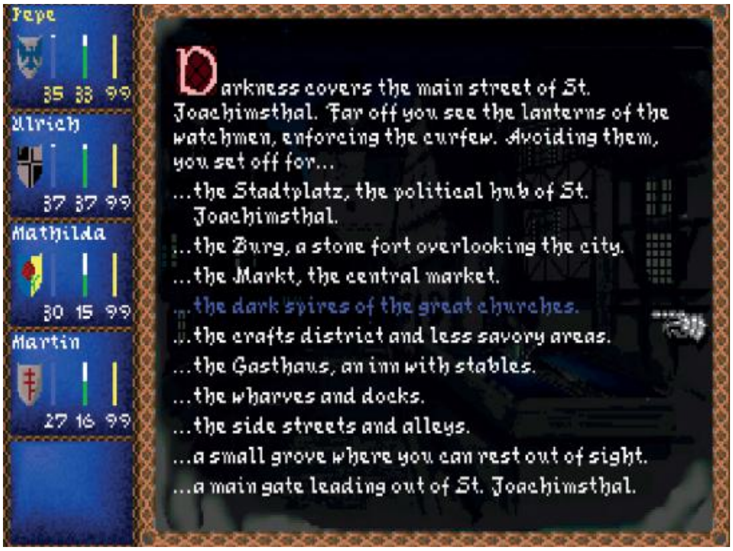
In *Darklands* you'll never gain experience points or level up. Progression is the result of your actions, successes and failures, increasing and decreasing your attributes in small increments. With a massive variety of skills and stats based on your chosen background, the game creates an interesting party dynamic in which characters have a multitude of skills they are good at, instead of the more typical singular focus of classes. Although classless builds are not uncommon in RPGs through the years, it was a rarity at the time, and it is still an exciting challenge to build a character without the crutch of a predefined class.

In a diversion from typical fantasy, the game has no Mage character – the closest you'll get to the arcane arts is a brilliant system of alchemy and divine prayer. It's a welcome change, as your builds take on qualities not often seen in RPGs, most notably with characters that can call on specific saints to intervene in a myriad of social and hostile situations.

The historical accuracy is charming and immersive, all the while being consistently fun to play, proving that once-existing nightmares, beliefs and folklore can be just as entertaining as the usual fantasy genre tropes. Similarly, equipment and loot are wonderfully time period-appropriate. It's refreshing to equip a pike because in the 15th century it was the best way to skewer a wolf with your arm intact, not because it does +25 fire damage.

"At the very start, I wanted the *Darklands*' 'hook' to be that it would use some beliefs from the era to 'justify' fantastical elements, rather than trotting out the usual bog-standard wizards, clerics, bards, etc. Where possible, I like my game designs to provide an insight into history – a 'you are there' feeling. When searching for tactical trade-offs and interesting details, why goof around conjuring up stuff when there is plenty of interesting historical material to use?"

– Arnold Hendrick,
Darklands*' lead designer*



Darkness covers the main street of St. Joachimsthal. Far off you see the lanterns of the watchmen, enforcing the curfew. Avoiding them, you set off for...

...the Stadtplatz, the political hub of St. Joachimsthal.

...the Burg, a stone fort overlooking the city.

...the Markt, the central market.

...the dark spires of the great churches.

...the crafts district and less savory areas.

...the Gasthaus, an inn with stables.

...the wharves and docks.

...the side streets and alleys.

...a small grove where you can rest out of sight.

...a main gate leading out of St. Joachimsthal.

Locations, dialogues and events are explored through Choose-Your-Own-Adventure screens like this, with nice hand-drawn illustrations in the background

Besides the unique setting and character system, *Darklands* also shines in its Choose-Your-Own-Adventure gameplay. Locations, dialogues and events are all explored primarily through illustrated screens offering multiple choices based on your stats/skills and a surprising amount of free will. These screens are all expertly written, with vivid descriptions that enhance the role-playing aspect of the game.

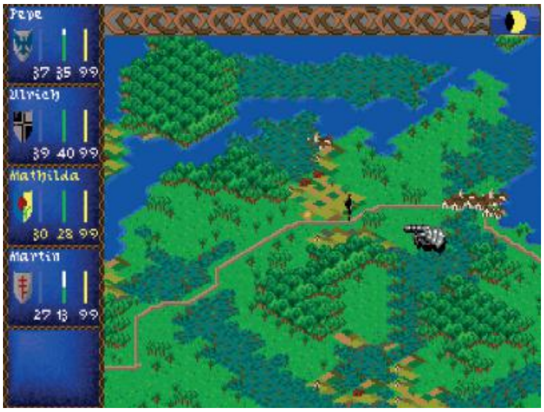
Whether you're deciding how to enter a town when you don't have the money to pay the tax, deal with an unwelcome bandit visit in the forest, or discuss a loan with a shrewd banker, the game often allows for multiple outcomes and consequences, many of which do not end well. *Darklands* is as challenging as it is rewarding, and your choices inevitably lead to undesirable scenarios such as crawling through sewers to escape a landscape of horrors, or surrendering to a vicious pack of creatures only to see one of your companions devoured as a penalty.

Interrupting your explorations are fast-paced isometric battles, fought through a real-time-with-pause combat – both innovative concepts at the time. These are usually prefaced with an opportunity to put some divine power on your side or toss an alchemical potion into the fray for a chance to escape. Without the right equipment these encounters can be brutal, leading to bandits robbing you of everything but a few pfennigs hidden in your boot.

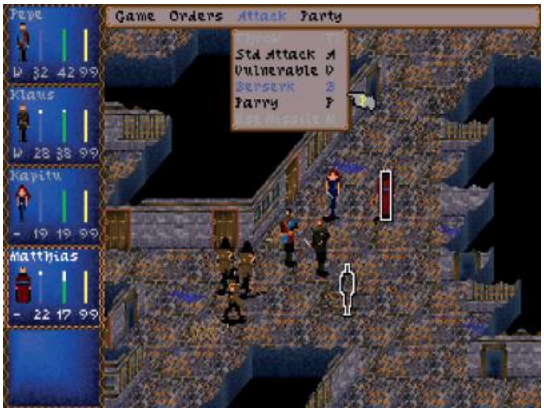
Despite all these notable systems and a carefully crafted setting, the release of *Darklands* was met with a mixed reception, mostly due to an unwieldy number of bugs and a tendency to crash.

The game endured, however, and has retroactively been labelled one of the best RPGs of all time, with a content-filled scale and scope that would influence games like Bethesda's *The Elder Scrolls* series and the real-time-with-pause combat in the Infinity Engine games. **H&JW**

Hendrick hinted at the possibility of creating sequels for *Darklands,* set in historical eras such as the Hundred Years' War, the War of the Roses or featuring Vlad the Impaler. Sadly, those were never realised, as he passed away in May 2020.



Darklands' map is huge and features many cities, villages, keeps, caves, mines, churches and other places of interest



Most battles end as soon as you slay all enemies, but a few of them take part in large, trap-filled dungeons

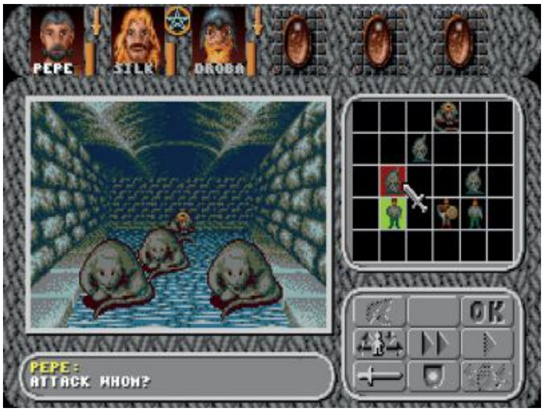
Amberstar

Thalion Software, 1992
Amiga, Atari ST and MS-DOS

First in a planned "Amber trilogy" of games set in the fantasy world of Lyramion, *Amberstar* starts out with the protagonist alone before the grave of his parents, trying to decide what to do next.

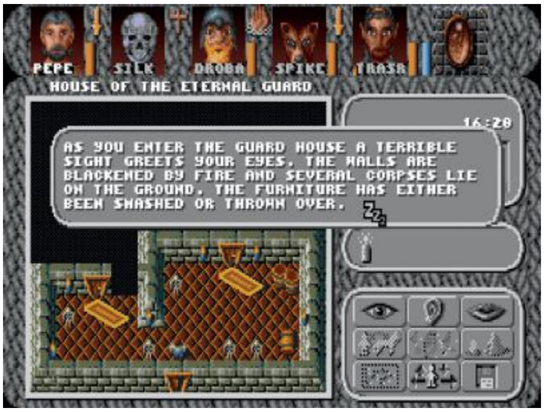
Amberstar came with a 180-page manual containing a short novel with the setting's backstory.

Soon the story leads into the city sewers for the usual rat-slaying to save a cat but, tellingly, even this is a special event with a twist, leading to a unique reward. *Amberstar* might seem conventional on the surface, but it manages tropes with its own flair.



PEPE:
ATTACK WHOM?

Inside dungeons and towns you play in a 2D first-person mode, while encounters move the party and its enemies to a tactical grid



HOUSE OF THE ETERNAL GUARD

AS YOU ENTER THE GUARD HOUSE A TERRIBLE SIGHT GREETS YOUR EYES. THE HALLS ARE BLACKENED BY FIRE AND SEVERAL CORPSES LIE ON THE GROUND. THE FURNITURE HAS EITHER BEEN SMASHED OR THROWN OVER.

Amberstar doesn't have any random encounters, but while you'll fight way less than in other RPGs, its battles and ambushes are much harder

Right from the moment you exit the starting city, you can go (almost) everywhere, easily getting lost in swamps and forests, unless you know where to go. On your way, you'll recruit others into your party to search for missing pieces of the titular Amberstar.

With an evocative soundtrack, a clever dialogue system based on keywords and quirky characters to meet, recruit or help out, *Amberstar* oozes charm. As you explore the land, your sense of accomplishment grows each time you find a way to reach to new places (riding horses, rafts, boats or even your own giant eagle), figure out a clue or win a difficult battle.

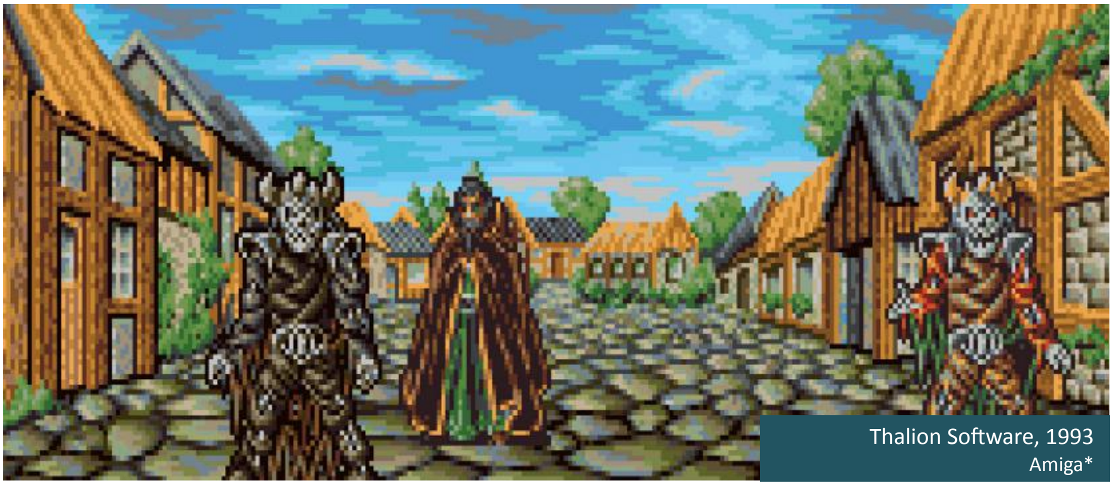
Combat is turn-based on a grid, with orders being given for all characters and then acted out all at once. It's an intuitive, albeit simple system, where your level and gear have a huge impact. Who you recruit for your party also makes for quite different strategies.

Amberstar doesn't hold your hand and features both subtle hints and infuriatingly hard riddles. There is no quest log – you are supposed to pay attention yourself (it's advised to write everything down) and act upon hints found in dialogue, deciphered runes and journals, searching for the mentioned places and solving elaborate enigmas to open up new areas.

At its core, *Amberstar* is all about exploration, wondering what lies over the next mountain range or behind the door inside the old ruin – though there are no branching stories, side-quests, random encounters or hundreds of items to collect, the world is sprawling and contains many cities and dungeons waiting to be found, all fitting into the main story.

While the sequel *Ambermoon* is even better, and while many might not have the focus and patience needed to enjoy this game in the modern age, for me it's a gem as enjoyable now as then – a game with unique wit and charm. **CH**

Ambermoon



Thalion Software, 1993
Amiga*

Ambermoon is the second game in the never-completed "Amber trilogy". Unfortunately, the game was a huge flop sales-wise, closing the doors of German developer Thalion even before they could port the game or finish translating it.

Luckily, an official English version was later leaked and made freely available, as all of Thalion's games became public domain after its demise.

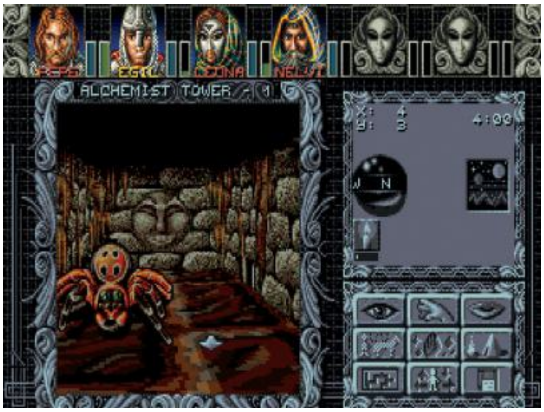
That said, let's look at the actual game. Taking place decades after *Amberstar*, system-wise the game is roughly identical – the same turn- and grid-based combat, inventory and dialogue system. The two exploration view modes remain: isometric for houses and wilderness, plus a first-person view for towns and dungeons – though now in 3D. As such, *Ambermoon*'s design is similar to *Albion*'s (1995), a better-known game later developed by former Thalion employees.

Ambermoon is huge, sprawling with locations to explore, though these are accessed in a somewhat linear fashion, with gates between areas – as opposed to the mostly free overland map of *Amberstar*. However, the charm, wit and storytelling of that game are still present. You play as the grandson of the earlier protagonist, who receives a quest from his dying grandfather. From there, the game is about travelling, finding companions for your party, solving quests and puzzles, and fighting a diverse range of opponents.

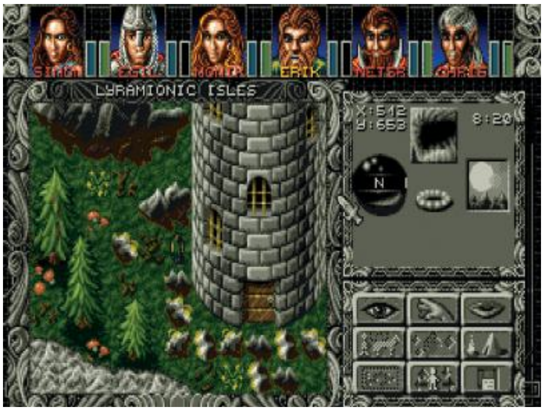
It's standard RPG fare, but done with a certain warmth and elegance, competent gameplay systems and lots of opportunities for exploration and immersion – even if the game's combat is somewhat slow and challenging in the first few hours. Returning players can also witness how the land and its people fared since *Amberstar*, when a moon crashed into the planet, changing it into a fragmented post-apocalyptic fantasy world.

Ambermoon, like *Amberstar,* concerns the story of a boy who is all alone in the world, and during his journey he finds new friends, helps villagers and kings but never loses his innocence. As such, it's simple and old-fashioned, but also endearing. *Ambermoon* might be the most hidden game gem you'll (n)ever come across, but if you liked *Albion* and/or *Amberstar*, this is a must-play. It's well-made, and has a clear direction as well as engaging puzzles and story. **CH**

***In 2021 a fan called Pyrdacor rewrote *Ambermoon* to run on Windows, Mac and Linux.**



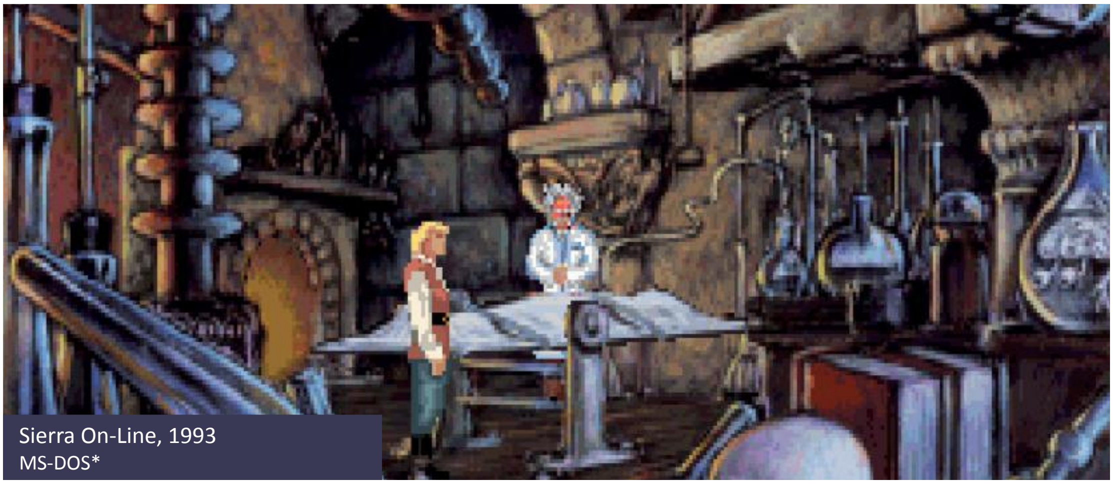
Dungeons and towns are now shown in a free-movement early 3D view, with roaming enemies and an excellent automap



The game doesn't hold your hand in any way; UI elements such as compass, clock and coordinates will only show if you find or buy them first

Quest for Glory:

Shadows of Darkness



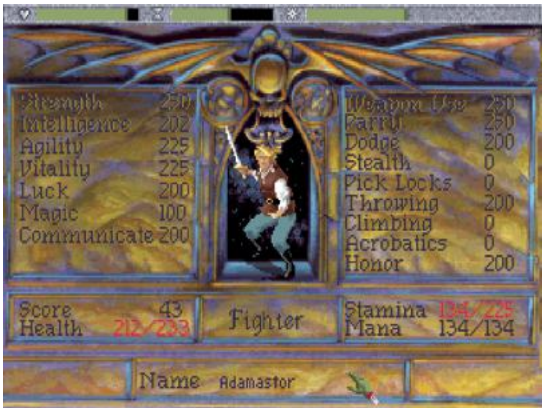
Sierra On-Line, 1993
MS-DOS*

***The first release of *Shadow of Darkness* was a rushed out floppy version, full of bugs and lacking the game's excellent voice acting. Avoid it at all costs.**

The fourth *Quest for Glory* game takes place in Mordavia, a haunted valley fit for a Universal horror film. Strange magic has summoned you to this land, and your only hope of escape is to find out why. But it won't be easy: the locals don't take kindly to strangers.

Here vampires, werewolves and gravediggers cavort before tainted churches and squirming elder gods. This is an autumn world, ever on the brink of Halloween. Or, perhaps, its invention. But that's not to say the game takes itself too seriously. *QfG4* is a perfect blend of comedy and gothic horror.

Like most great games, there's a bit of a learning curve. Part RPG, part adventure game, it's also very much its own thing. You create a character, fight battles, and raise stats by repeatedly using them. But the highest priced item isn't a sword, it's a hand broom (don't worry, I'm sure it will come in handy). And to get health potions you must beat a musical memory game, win a round of twenty questions, trap a Tribble-like creature and guide the bouncy little sucker through a rotating rat maze.



Strength 250
Intelligence 202
Agility 225
Vitality 225
Luck 200
Magic 100
Communicate 200

Weapon Use 250
Parry 250
Dodge 200
Stealth 0
Pick Locks 0
Throwing 200
Climbing 0
Acrobatics 0
Honor 200

Score 43
Health 212/233

Fighter

Stamina 134/225
Mana 134/134

Name Adamastor

The character system remains very similar to that of previous games in the series, with three core classes plus the possibility of making hybrids

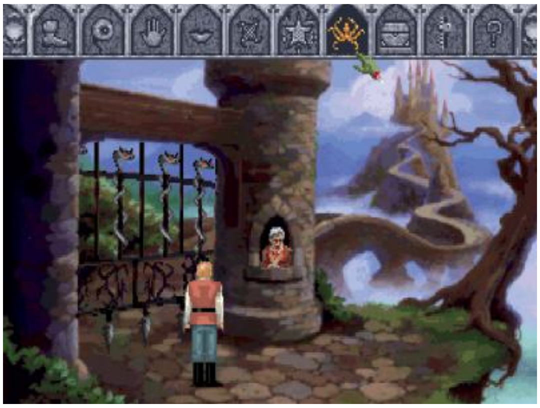
Seasoned adventurers will try to combine every inventory item with everything in sight. But the world is so vast and there are so many items (you can get over-encumbered!) that brute-force puzzle-solving will get you nowhere. Progress is less about raising stats or combining items than talking to the right person, in the right place, at the right time.

You can play a Fighter, Thief or Magic-User, or import a Paladin from the last game. Problems have multiple solutions, ranging from casting the right spell through picking the right lock to punching the right face. I always picked the Fighter, much to the sarcastic narrator's delight: "You read the book, written entirely in one-syllable words, obviously intended for Fighters. It's absolutely fascinating."

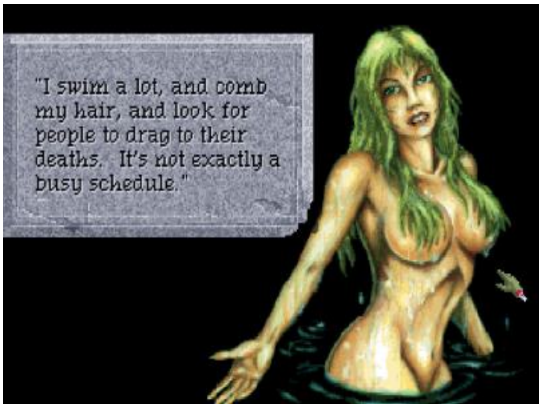
Combat is a war of attrition. Fought in an arcade-like manner (or set to auto-battle), individual encounters aren't overly challenging, but eventually you'll find yourself lost, poisoned and down to your last potion. Flee in terror and you'll be chased, screen after screen, until you find sanctuary or eternal rest – whichever comes first. Resting is only possible in a few locations, and the feeling of relief when you step into the warm safety of the inn should be familiar to anyone who played the original *Resident Evil*.

Few games have such atmosphere. As you leave town, the excellent soundtrack slowly fades, as if afraid to follow you into the woods. Darkness doesn't fall in Mordavia, it slowly suffocates the light. And as the gnarled trees look more and more like grasping hands, you might catch yourself wondering: Wait a minute … was that thing there before?

QfG4 was also one of the first "talkie" games, using CD-ROM technology to store thousands of spoken lines. Back then, actually being able to hear people talk was something of a revelation.

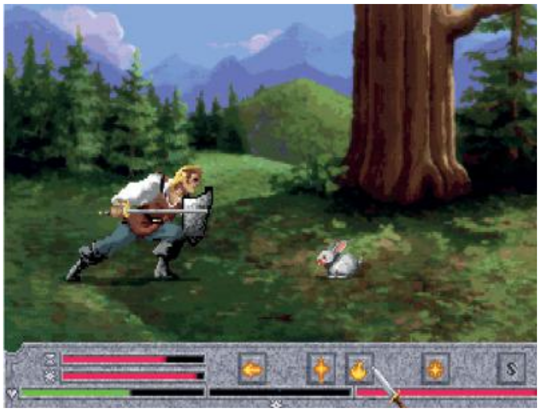


The point-and-click controls are very accessible, with verbs, items and spells placed in a hidden bar atop the screen

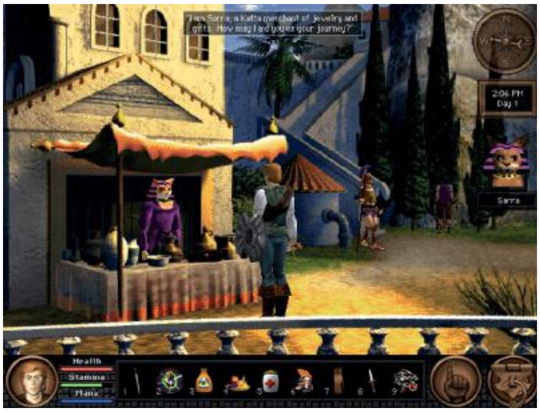


"I swim a lot, and comb my hair, and look for people to drag to their deaths. It's not exactly a busy schedule."

The game delivers a brilliant blend of horror and deadly situations with silly gags and a charming sense of humour



Combat is somewhat arcade-like, and enemies range from poisonous wyverns to *Monty Python*-esque killer bunnies



"I am Sarra, a Katta merchant of jewelry and gifts. How may I aid you on your journey?"

Quest for Glory V is huge, but also a radical departure, featuring 3D graphics and a heavy focus on combat

The narrator (voiced by John Rhys-Davies, who played Gimli in *Lord of the Rings)* acts like a skilled Game Master, describing sights, smells and sounds. Characters have pages of dialogue, ranging from dire warnings to throwaway gags. The most memorable is a trio of townsfolk who sound suspiciously like Jack Nicholson, Rodney Dangerfield, and, er, Jack Nicholson (the voice actors were asked which celebrities they could impersonate, and when two answered Nicholson, they went with it).

The story really comes together when you meet the Domovoi, a house spirit who reveals just how much the town has suffered. Usually NPCs can't wait to burden total strangers with their problems: step into town and you'll be mobbed by locals waving tales of woe like street urchins thrusting baubles at tourists.

But Mordavians are too guarded, too devoid of hope to even bother. It's the Domovoi who helps you realise these are more than one-joke characters. They're good people who've lived so long in darkness they've forgotten about the light. The goal isn't really to escape Mordavia, the goal is to set it free.

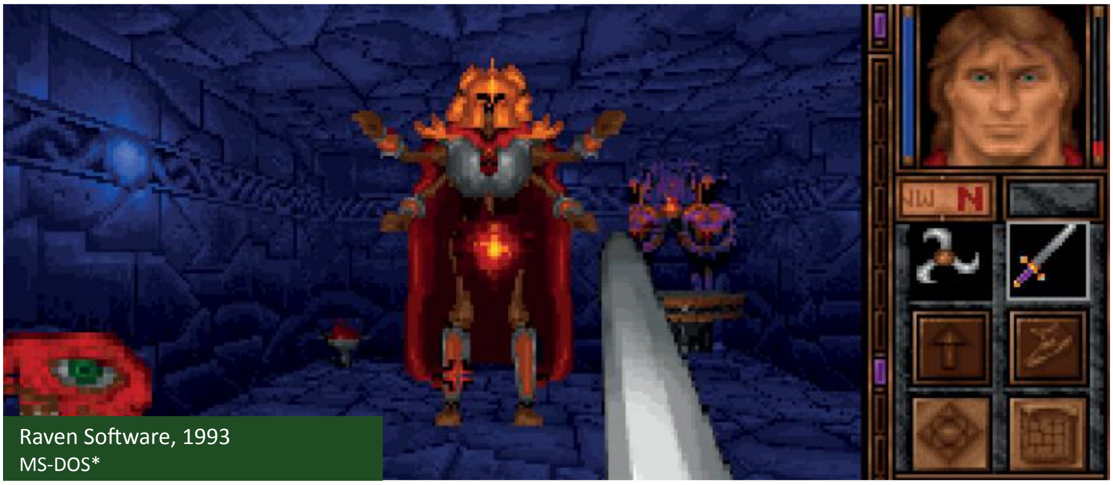
On the surface, *QfG4* seems like a light-hearted comedy, the RPG equivalent of *Young Frankenstein*. But this is a tale of love, sacrifice and redemption. It just happens to feature duelling Jack Nicholson impersonators and enough puns to send the narrator into a giggle fit. And trust me, you haven't lived until you've heard John Rhys-Davies giggle.

The first four *Quest for Glory* games were released from 1989 to 1993, in a golden era of adventure games, but, sadly, the genre declined heavily in the following years, and *Quest for Glory V: Dragon Fire* (1998) feels torn between moving on with the world and pleasing old fans. Troubled by a nightmarish development cycle, it's a huge game that offers an epic ending to the series, but also features blocky early 3D graphics and a heavy focus on combat, leading to a mixed reception.

After its release, the team was laid off by Sierra, and the series' distinctive gameplay was followed only by a handful of fan-games – until 2012, when Kickstarter brought a wave of spiritual successors, including one from the series' original creators, Lori and Corey Cole, titled *Hero-U: Rogue to Redemption*. **JRA**

There are three popular fan-made games based on the series: *Quest for Yrolg, Quest for Glory 4½* (both parodies) and the excellent *Heroine's Quest: The Herald of Ragnarok.*

ShadowCaster

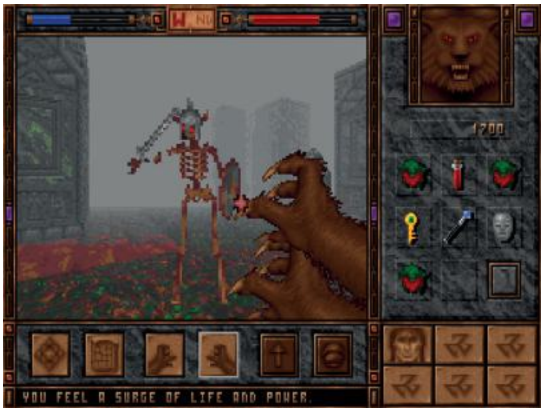


Raven Software, 1993
MS-DOS*

Raven Software is known today as an Activision subsidiary working on the *Call of Duty* series; in the mid-'90s it was known as the developer of *Heretic* and *Hexen*; but they really began in 1992 with *Black Crypt,* a real-time blobber for the Amiga.

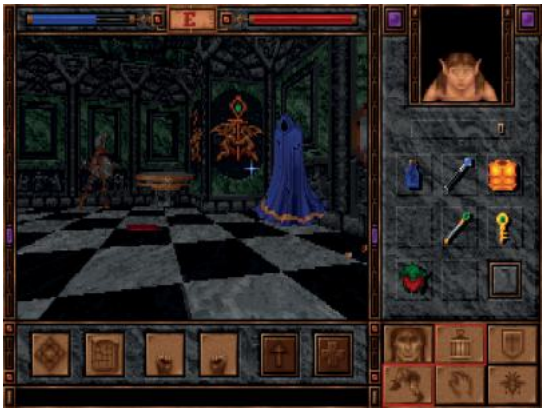
Sensing the death of the Amiga, they licensed a new engine id's John Carmack was working on after *Wolfenstein 3D* (but before *Doom*) and made what's arguably the first FPS/RPG hybrid: *ShadowCaster.*

***ShadowCaster* was re-released on CD-ROM in 1994, adding voice acting, FMV sequences and two challenging levels after you finish the game.**



YOU FEEL A SURGE OF LIFE AND POWER.

While most of your time will be spent fighting, combat isn't fun: it's slow, easy and lacks both the complexity of an RPG and the action of *Doom*



Each form has unique advantages, cons and powers: the Caun is small and weak, but can heal himself, sneak and cast light, telekinesis and other spells

You play as Kirt, a man who (very) suddenly finds out that he is a shape-shifter from another dimension who must defeat Malkor, an evil outcast god.

As a shape-shifter, Kirt will learn to assume various forms during his adventures. He begins with just the Maorin form – a huge werewolf with four arms. In this form, you're stronger, tougher, faster and can see invisible traps, but drown in water.

Later on, Kirt will also learn to transform into others: Caun, – a small and fragile spellcaster who can sneak around; Opsis, a floating eyeball that can scout the map and scare enemies; Kahpa, a frog-like creature that can breathe underwater and perform elemental attacks; Ssair, a red salamander that can breathe fire; and Grost, a nearly invincible stone giant who can punch through walls and cause earthquakes.

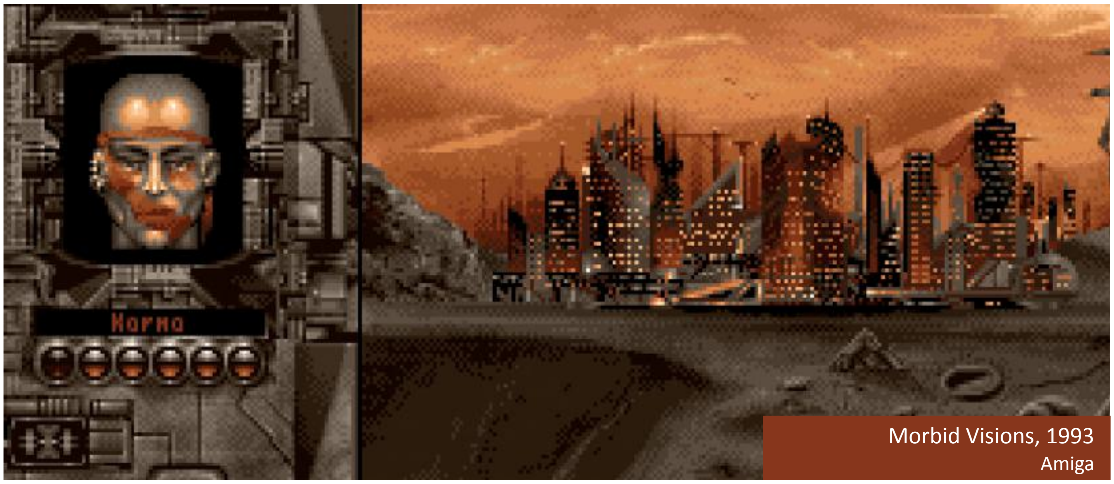
However, taking the form of a creature and using its abilities drains Kirt's magical power. Once it runs out, he'll revert to his human form, which naturally regenerates magic power but is much weaker.

While exploring the dungeons you'll come across a few simple puzzles, as well as weapons, armour, potions, keys and magic items you can collect. Kirt also gains XP and can level up, but all stats are hidden.

While all this sounds cool, *ShadowCaster* never lives up to its potential. Kirt has all these interesting abilities, yet they are used sparingly and in predictable ways. Combat is the real focus, but it's dull and slow (especially for a *Doom*-like), with small, crude maps, weak enemy design and over-reliance on melee.

A real-time blobber inside an early *Doom* engine, *ShadowCaster* was a promising concept powered by impressive technology, but its parts never clicked together. It's not surprising that Raven Software would next create *Heretic,* streamlining the RPG elements to deliver a *Doom*-like fast-paced FPS. **FE**

Perihelion:
The Prophecy



Morbid Visions, 1993
Amiga

Released only in Europe and exclusive to the then-declining Amiga, this obscure sci-fi RPG oozes atmosphere with its audacious two-tone palette, ominous soundtrack and exotic setting.

Inspired by *Dune* rather than *Lord of the Rings* (why do so few games do this?), *Perihelion* is set on a planet ravaged by ancient wars and inhabited by cyborgs, psionic cultists and genetically engineered mutants, all ruled by a long line of Imperial clones.

The stylised intro sequence tells of a powerful psionic god named "The Unborn" trying to breach into this reality, causing chaos all across the planet. To stop it, the Emperor summons six prophesied heroes kept in stasis for centuries just for this moment: your party.

You start the game by creating said party from several races and classes, in a complex but poorly explained ruleset – you can do things like customise the DNA composition of hybrid races, but the manual won't even tell you what each class stands for! That finished (somehow), you start your quest.

Perihelion is a first-person dungeon crawler with tactical turn-based combat, similar to the Gold Box games. A core difference is that it's much shorter – about 8–10 hours long – and its focus is more on its story. Combat occurs sparingly and there are no random encounters, which is welcome, given how slow and underwhelming the game's battles are.

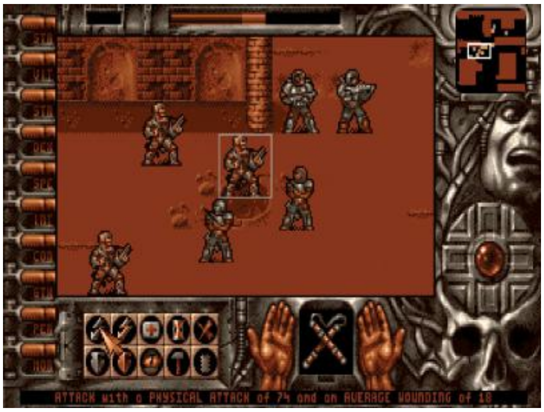
That, unfortunately, can also be said for most of the game itself. The atmosphere is great, and the story tries very hard to be interesting, but you'll spend most of your time roaming across empty cities and dungeons, trying to figure out what to do next.

There's also the issue of the interface – while it looks impressive, it's cumbersome and unintuitive. Simple actions, such as examining an item or talking to NPCs, are way harder than they ever needed to be.

In fact, the entire game has this strong "form over function" feeling. Features such as using computer terminals for investigative work (you need to actually type in commands like "read" or "login") or crafting your own spells via runes are all great in concept, but become busy-work due to their poor execution.

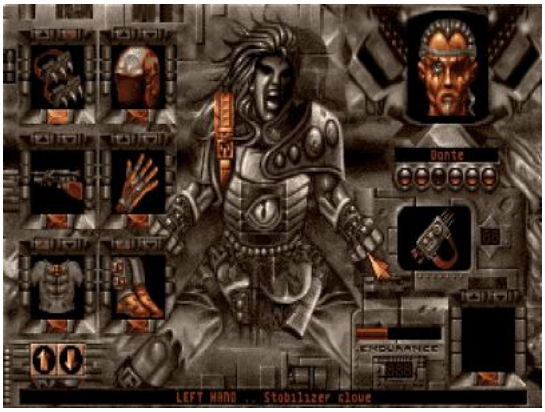
It's a shame that such unique presentation and setting are tied to such a weak RPG. In the end, it's better to just look at, rather than actually play, *Perihelion*. **FE**

***Perihelion* was declared abandonware by its designer, Edvard Toth, who put together a game + emulator pack for anyone to download.**



ATTACK with a PHYSICAL ATTACK of 74 and an AVERAGE WOUNDING of 18

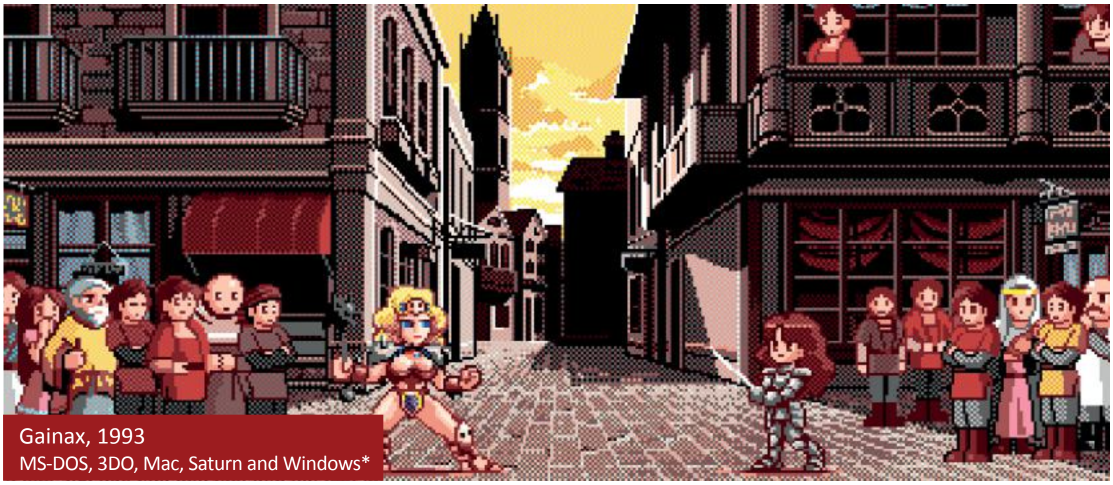
The tactical turn-based combat looks similar to that in the Gold Box games, but uses action points and psionic spells



LEFT HAND .. Stabilizer Glove

To examine an item, you must select it on the inventory screen, move to the network screen and then type "ANALYSE", which gets tiresome fast

Princess Maker 2



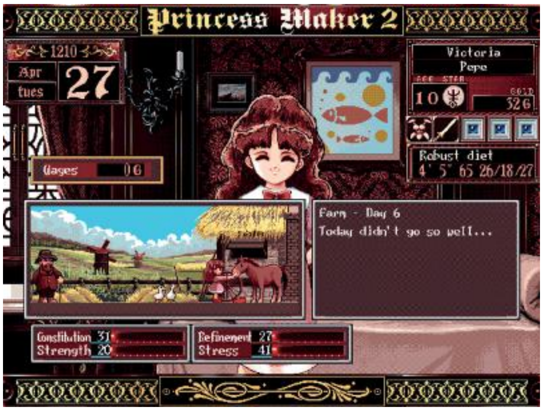
Gainax, 1993
MS-DOS, 3DO, Mac, Saturn and Windows*

***In 2004 a new version called *Princess Maker 2: Refine* was issued in Japan for PS2 and Windows, featuring updated art and full voice acting. This is the version released on Steam in 2016, though some fans still prefer the original leaked MS-DOS beta.**

Princess Maker 2 is a Japanese RPG, but its US release was an adventure by itself. In 1995 Soft-Egg Enterprises began to localise the game into English, but ran into countless delays. By the time things were sorted out, no one cared anymore for an MS-DOS game. Without an official English release, the game became a cult hit after a beta version of the translation was leaked and started to circulate in the early 2000s. It was only in 2016 that the game was finally officially released in English, via Steam.

The series is worthy of closer examination, as *Princess Maker* (1990) pioneered the sim-raising genre, spawning many sequels and inspiring similar games. It also helps that the game was developed by Gainax, the anime studio famous for *Evangelion*. So let us abandon all prejudices and dive into this often-overlooked gem!

Princess Maker 2 takes place in a fantasy-medieval setting, where the player takes the role of a retired war veteran to whose protection is entrusted a young girl. As her father, players must raise the girl from her 10th birthday until she turns 18 years old, taking care of her jobs, studies, training and adventures.



Farm - Day 6
Today didn't go so well...

Each job has its own pros and cons: working as a farmer helps to raise stats that are important for a fighter, but it's frowned upon by the nobles

Each of those activities takes 10 days of a monthly schedule you must plan for your daughter. Working increases some of her stats but decreases others and potential pay depends solely on her performance. For example, working as a lumberjack will increase strength but decrease her sensibility. If she works well, she returns home with pay. Schools are expensive, especially in the early game, but as your daughter studies, she can advance into more expensive master classes, which yield even more skill points.

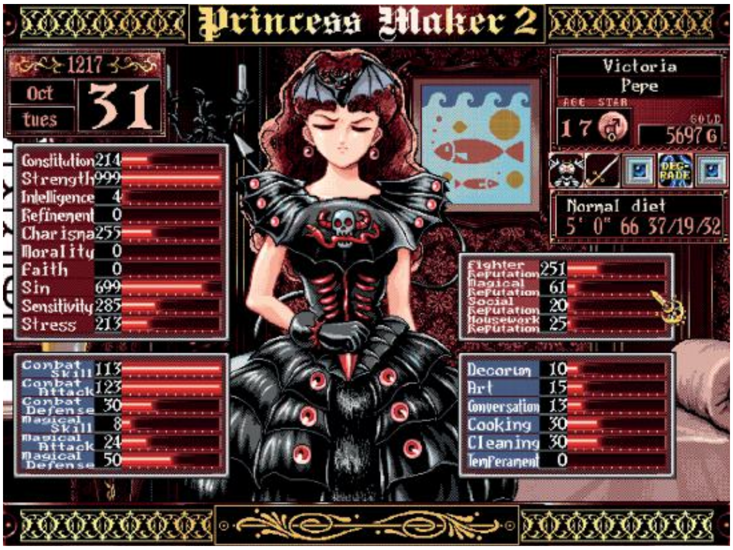
She can also participate in more traditional RPG activities: going on adventures, bringing back money and rare items, and having special encounters (tip: usually by camping near interesting locations). There are four areas to go through, successively moderately more difficult. Every area has plenty of surprises, even if their size feels underwhelming. Adventuring won't usually take more than a third of the game's time for most players. Sometimes random enemies will appear, engaging your daughter in battle. Combat is very simple and consists only of attacking with either physical hits or magical spells and using items.

Stats include many skills and attributes, both visible and hidden ones; oddly enough, attributes don't affect skills in any way. Your daughter's starting stats depend on her sign and blood type and she'll face various hidden checks during the game.

Depending on players' goals, each stat is more or less useful (although some may take a part in a wider variety of goals). Increasing them might sometimes be a challenge in the face of ever-decreasing funds, especially since developers have foreseen that most players make their daughters warriors on their first playthrough, thus making it the most difficult path. But pure might won't take her far; only investing in social skills can take her up the social ladder.

“Mr. Okada [Gainax’s President] told me that, because he was born a man, he often failed to understand women. He wanted a game where he could experience how it would be to live and die as a woman. […]I also had a game I wanted to make. I loved *Nobunaga’s Ambition*, but didn’t enjoy the battle scenes. I wanted a game that was *Nobunaga’s Ambition*, but only the parts where you train subordinates. […] The next week I returned with a smile on my face, saying, ‘Let’s make a game about raising a girl’.”

– Takami Akai,
Princess Maker 2*’s director*


Princess Maker 2
1217
Oct
tues
31
Victoria
Pepe
AGE STAR
17
GOLD
5697 G
DEG-RADE
Normal diet
5' 0" 66 37/19/32
Constitution 214
Strength 999
Intelligence 4
Refinement 0
Charisma 255
Morality 0
Faith 0
Sin 699
Sensitivity 285
Stress 213
Fighter Reputation 251
Magical Reputation 61
Social Reputation 20
Housework Reputation 25
Combat Skill 113
Combat Attack 123
Combat Defense 30
Magical Skill 8
Magical Attack 24
Magical Defense 50
Decorum 10
Art 15
Conversation 13
Cooking 30
Cleaning 30
Temperament 0

The game overflows with stats, skills and numbers, but not all of them are under your control; e.g. if you don’t treat your daughter well, she might become a stubborn delinquent

Don’t want your daughter to become a fighter? Worry not, *Princess Maker 2* features more than 70 different careers. Once she’s 18, the game ends and she’ll follow a path that depends on how she was raised, as well as on her friendships and actions during the game. She can become a hero, a dancer, a painter, a general, a queen, a martial arts teacher, a BDSM queen, a nun, a writer, a luxurious prostitute, a thug, a knight or even the Princess of Darkness. Sometimes there is also an extra check to see how well she’ll perform in a given profession. A dancer’s success depends on her constitution, and only intelligent thugs can avoid pursuit.

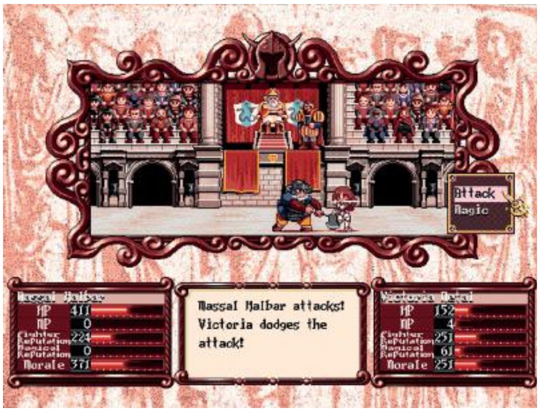
Mid-game, your daughter gets, based on her stats, a rival that she will have the pleasure of facing at festivals. These festivals take place once a year and she can participate via combat, cooking, painting or dancing challenges – all of which wield fantastic rewards and a great deal of fame.

What really sets *Princess Maker 2* apart are its choices and consequences. Is your daughter refined and charismatic? Then a rich man in love will start appearing and giving her free money. Did she sell the sword she got from a king? It will be found and her reputation will go down. Did she befriend a prime minister? Then as a judge of a dancing competition, he will make sure she gets an easier time beating the challenge. Did she slay many monsters? Then she will stop having any remorse about it. Should she paint a good painting, it will be displayed in her room. Those little moments are what make or break a game, and *Princess Maker 2* is outstanding in this regard.

Driven heavily by stats and by player decisions, *Princess Maker 2* is a great game for players who enjoy those aspects of role-playing games.

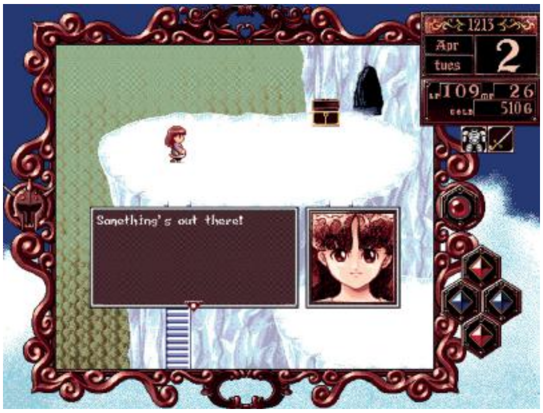
You won’t find challenging combat or deep plotline here, but rest assured, it’s a game you will want to replay, again and again. **JMR**

There are nine *Princess Maker* games, most of them released only in Japan. However, there are various Western spiritual successors, such as *Cute Knight*, *Spirited Heart* and *Long Live the Queen*.


Attack
Magic
HP 411
MP 0
Fighter Reputation 224
Magical Reputation 0
Morale 371
HP 152
MP 4
Fighter Reputation 251
Magical Reputation 61
Morale 251

Massal Malbar attacks!
Victoria dodges the attack!

During battles you simply choose between using physical or magical attacks, and hope that all that training was enough


1213
Apr
tues
2
109
26
GOLD
510 G

Something's out there!

When out on adventures, your daughter might find wild beasts, treasures and some very special encounters

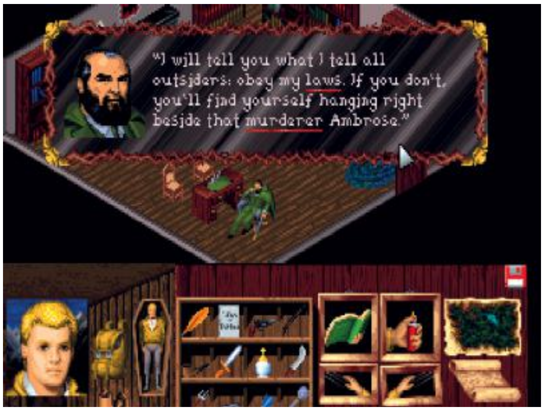
Veil of Darkness

Event Horizon, 1993
MS-DOS, PC-98 and FM Towns

After releasing *Veil of Darkness*, Event Horizon changed the company's name to DreamForge Intertainment.

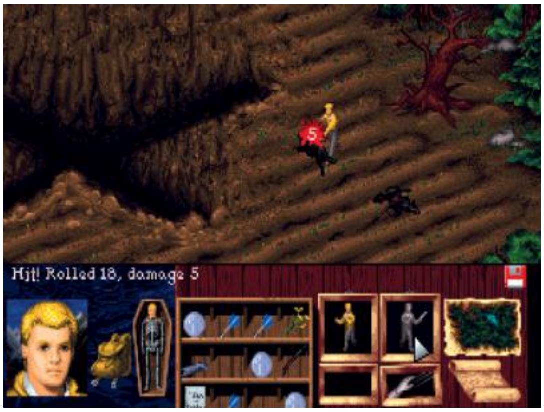
Veil of Darkness is an odd game. You play as a cargo pilot whose plane suddenly crashes in a remote Romanian region. Saved by the daughter of a local baron, you quickly realise that leaving the valley is out of the question. Indeed, an evil vampire called Kairn magically sealed the region using mist, hence the name *Veil of Darkness*.

The good news is that an ancient prophecy foretold your arrival, nominating you as the "chosen one".



"I will tell you what I tell all outsiders: obey my laws. If you don't, you'll find yourself hanging right beside that murderer Ambrose."

The dialogue system uses both highlighted keywords and a text parser



Hit! Rolled 18, damage 5

Combat is real-time and based on clicking on the weapons in your hands – an odd mix of *Diablo* and *Dungeon Master*; your health is metered via a body in a coffin

Your task in the game is to fulfil the prophecy stanza by stanza (it's a HUGE pamphlet), following it almost as a quest log, to learn the tragic tale of Kairn and eventually kill him.

Your biggest allies are in a camp of mysterious gypsies and act as advisers and healers. The story feels unique, the dialogues are well-done and the gothic atmosphere itself is gripping. If you are half the nerd I am, you're already screaming, "Dark lord, gypsies, fog: *RAVENLOFT*!" Too bad that the generic protagonist feels out of place, with his lack of personality and outrageous yellow jacket.

Even if it's sold as an RPG, *Veil of Darkness* is more like an adventure game in the end. It's possible to smash hordes of enemies without breaking a sweat and most of the bosses or special enemies are glorified puzzles. Indeed, combat is in real time but not very difficult, that is IF you possess the right weapon. As in every horror story, each monster is vulnerable to a certain type of weapon. Movement and combat are solved through clicking, giving serious *Diablo* vibes.

Before dealing with Kairn directly, various tasks given to you by villagers and linked to the prophecy must be dealt with: hunting down a werewolf, curing a child from madness, laying a ghost to rest, etc. Progression is left to the player's choice, but the lack of certain key objects or weapons tends to limit your options. Quests are solved through specific actions, chains of dialogue or just getting a unique item. It's not rocket science but some thinking might be required.

In a nutshell, *Veil of Darkness* is a great adventure game but not really a good RPG. It was Event Horizon's last attempt to mix these genres, as they went back to making more orthodox CRPGs and the excellent point-and-click *Sanitarium*. Still, I would recommend it for the nice story and the *Ravenloft* vibes. **TR**

BloodNet

MicroProse, 1993
MS-DOS and Amiga

Vampires are pretty cool, but you know what is cooler? Vampires in a cyberpunk setting. At least, that's what Microprose thought when it created *BloodNet*.

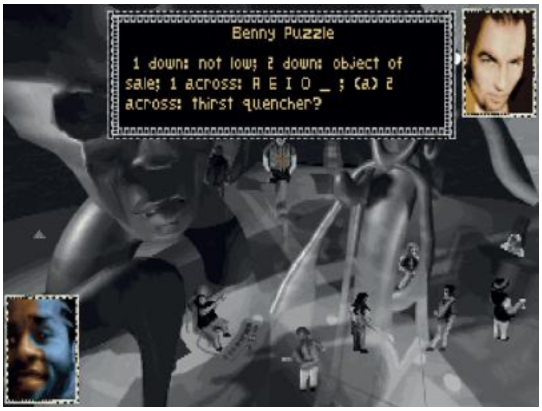
The premise is quite simple. You play as Ransom Stark, a private eye living in a futuristic Manhattan. One night's flirting with a cute girl ends up going south as he is bitten by a hundred-year-old vampire cleverly called Abraham Van Helsing. Stark escapes but is doomed to slowly turn into a fully-fledged vampire. The objective of the game is simple: destroy Van Helsing and find the ultimate icebreaker to destroy once and for all the vampire "virus". It's mostly *Shadowrun* with a touch of *World of Darkness*.

Being half-vampire, Stark has humanity and a bloodlust pool. You must drink blood to keep the bloodlust under control, but you lose humanity when biting humans. The story and the dialogues are intriguing and usually well-done. Ransom is a funny character; the supporting cast is extremely colourful; and the vampire/cyberpunk concept eventually grows on you.

BloodNet uses a lot of stats: combat, hacking, social but also vampire-related skills. Party members can be enrolled to expand your panel of actions. The controls are point-and-clicks with gigantic environments and very tiny, pixelated characters evolving through them. It's not very good-looking and some cutscenes use those god-awful early 3D renders. You can also hack into cyberspace to access "pits", private sectors, through specific keywords to solve major puzzles or reach sub-quests.

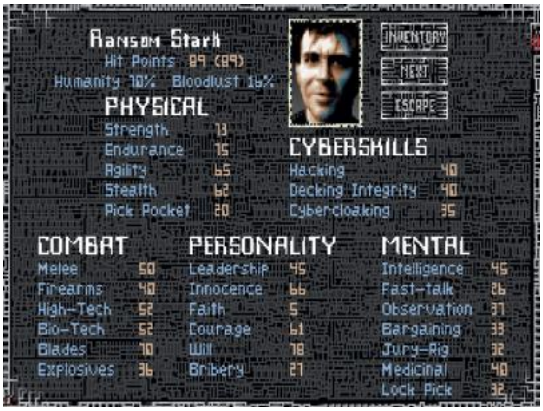
Combat is awful and badly explained. It's a basic turn-based system, but some stats don't make sense and others are useless. For example, initiative never works and damage ratings seem completely random. It's just a mess, and once you understand that only firearms and high-tech weapons are useful, you just save-scum and power your way through.

BloodNet starts with an interesting premise, develops it halfway but never truly succeeds in turning it into a fun game. The ending is also a cop-out and feels like a sequel-hook. Unfortunately for MicroProse, the planned sequel – *BloodNet 2000* – was quickly cancelled. **TR**


Benny Puzzle

1 down: not low; 2 down: object of sale; 1 across: A E I O _ ; (a) 2 across: thirst quencher?

One of the characters, Benny Puzzle, speaks in crossword puzzles; here, he's offering to buy you a drink



Ransom Stark
Hit Points 89 (89)
Humanity 10% Bloodlust 16%

PHYSICAL
Strength 13
Endurance 15
Agility 65
Stealth 62
Pick Pocket 20

CYBERSKILLS
Hacking 40
Decking Integrity 40
Cybercloaking 35

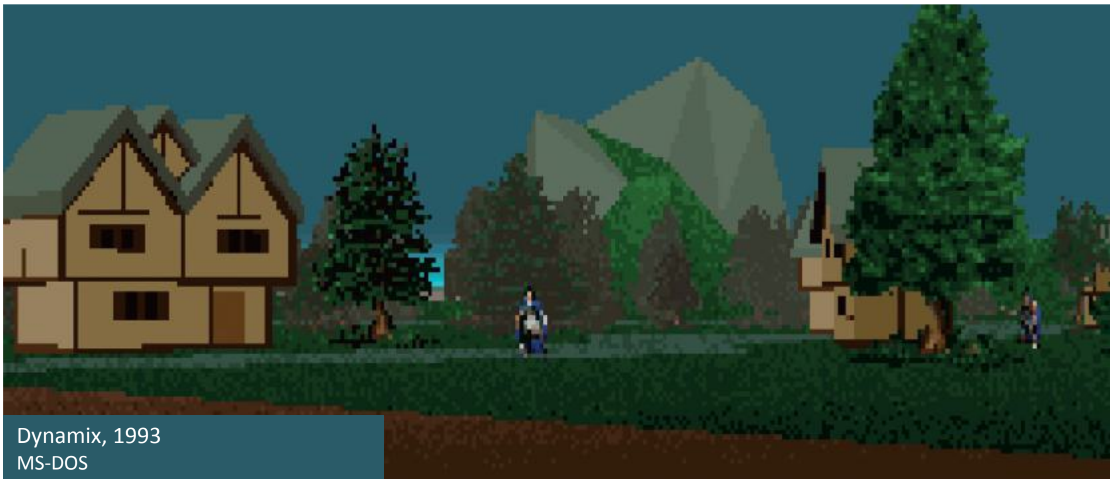
COMBAT
Melee 50
Firearms 40
High-Tech 52
Bio-Tech 52
Blades 10
Explosives 36

PERSONALITY
Leadership 45
Innocence 66
Faith 5
Courage 61
Will 18
Bribery 27

MENTAL
Intelligence 45
Fast-talk 26
Observation 37
Bargaining 33
Jury-Rig 32
Medicinal 40
Lock Pick 32

Besides the skill trees, there's also a good number of items to equip your characters, including unique weapons and armour

Betrayal at Krondor

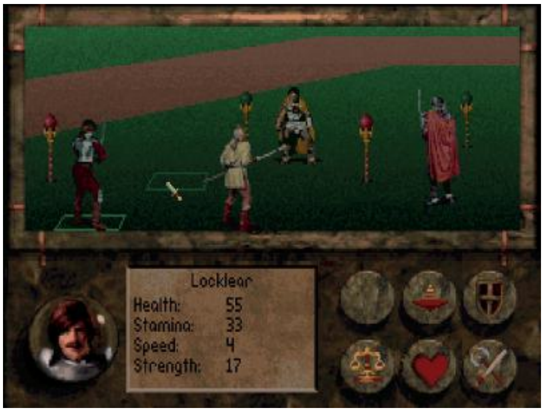

Dynamix, 1993
MS-DOS

***Betrayal at Krondor* had quite the interesting development history, and it has been described in detail by lead writer Neal Hallford on his website in a series titled “Krondor Confidential”.**

Betrayal at Krondor was released in 1993 and still remains one of the best games the CRPG genre has to show. The reasons for this are many, but they all, ultimately, come down to the same thing – *BaK* offers all the “major” RPG design aspects (combat, exploration, narrative), and it does so splendidly.

The combat might appear basic on paper. You control 2–3 characters on a small semi-isometric grid, taking turns smacking down enemies that usually outnumber you. The real deal, however, lies in the details, as the combat in *Krondor* is very fiddly.

Taking damage lowers combat efficiency; spells are interesting and plentiful, but cost health to cast; and some enemies may come back from the dead or run away when low on HP. Preparation is also vital, since foes not only outnumber you, but also employ dirty tricks such as poisoned or blessed weapons (and in contrast to many other games, poison in *Krondor* is serious business). Thus, it’s always good to keep a large supply of consumables of your own to boost your gear and even the odds. Especially if you’re about to face five angry Moredhel warlocks.


Locklear
Health: 55
Stamina: 33
Speed: 4
Strength: 17

You’ll face several kinds of enemy in combat, as well as puzzle-like trap encounters that require you to navigate the area in a certain way

While the combat in *Betrayal at Krondor* might not be particularly groundbreaking, it has one major job that it accomplishes exactly as it should – to burn through your supplies and put blocks in your way as you explore.

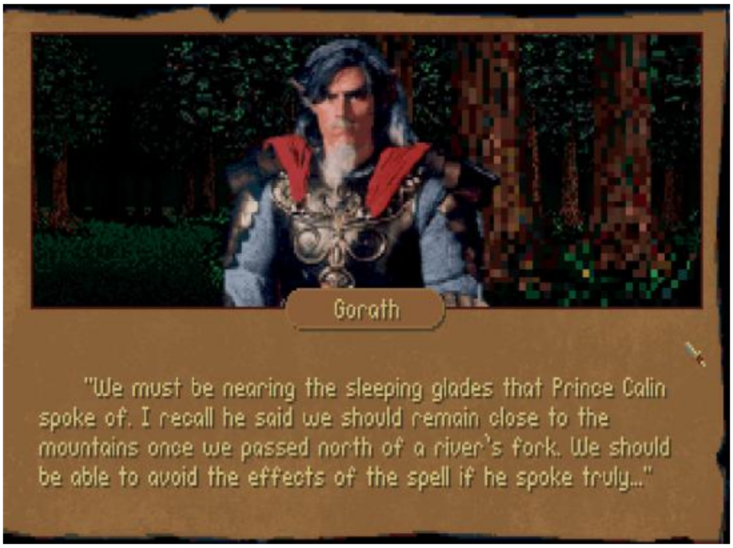
Exploration is a key part of the game. Not only is the gameworld huge and full of content, it also opens nearly all of its landmass to you from the get-go and encourages you to uncover it. The shortest way towards your goal might be the most perilous one, while side-paths, hidden dungeons and seemingly unimportant villages may hold hints necessary to understand the events that play out in the game.

Another great aspect of *Krondor*’s exploration is how involved it is. Your party needs food rations to keep going, and you have to watch out for rations that are poisoned or spoiled. You can use various spells to light your way in the night or hide yourself from enemies. You can go anywhere you want, dig up cemeteries, catch diseases and die on the way to the temple because you forgot to pack the necessary medication, or get exploded in a naphtha mine after you try to use a torch.

There are also plenty of puzzles along the way, including the famous Wordlock chests that open only when you give the right answer to their riddles. The only thing that could be said to spoil the exploration a bit is the game’s graphics, which haven’t aged all that well. Or, at least, the ones showing the regular outside world, because underground sections and general artwork (and the glorious live actors in goofy costumes) are all top-notch. Not to mention the terrific music that accompanies you everywhere.

Finally, the area where *Krondor* probably shines the most, and which no game to this day has managed to top, is in its writing and narrative.

> “Unlike other games whose progression mechanic largely revolved around ‘clearing out’ levels and always moving forward, we made a radical decision. Our game world would be persistent. It would exist – and change – whether or not the player showed up to see what was going on. In answer to the classic zen koan, our answer was yes, the tree would definitely make a sound when it fell in the forest, but it would be up to the player to decide whether or not they were going to be there to hear it fall.”
>
> *– Neal Hallford,* Betrayal at Krondor*’s writer*



Gorath

"We must be nearing the sleeping glades that Prince Calin spoke of. I recall he said we should remain close to the mountains once we passed north of a river's fork. We should be able to avoid the effects of the spell if he spoke truly..."

As in a book, *Krondor*’s story is divided into several chapters, each following a set group of characters pursuing a certain objective

The game is loosely based on Raymond E. Feist’s *Riftwar* saga, a high-fantasy book series from the ’80s, although it doesn’t share that many elements with the books (which is probably for the best, to be frank). If you’re familiar with *Riftwar*, you’ll probably recognise many of the characters and past events described in-game, but that’s it, really.

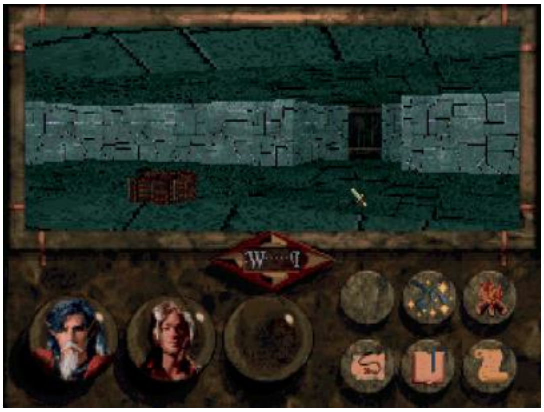
Still, this grounding in literature lends itself well to *Krondor*’s general writing format. That is, everything here resembles a book. The story is divided into chapters, switching between different characters and locations. Messages show up on paper pages, descriptions are detailed and robust, and there are very few “functional” texts to find here, such as “this doesn’t work” or “wrong item” – no, the game always presents you with an intricate picture of something, such as a character trying something nonsensical and saying he has to stay focused or he’ll be putting jam on his sword and poison in his sandwich the next time.

But the style is not all, for the story in *Krondor* is also one of the best around. The game presents a political intrigue with a hundred million billion twists, turns and hidden layers, and it’s up to your party, caught in the middle of this maelstrom, to make sense of it. Plus, as said before, simply going from plot point A to B is never enough. To really connect the dots you have to investigate the whole world and gather clues, or you’ll just keep stumbling around.

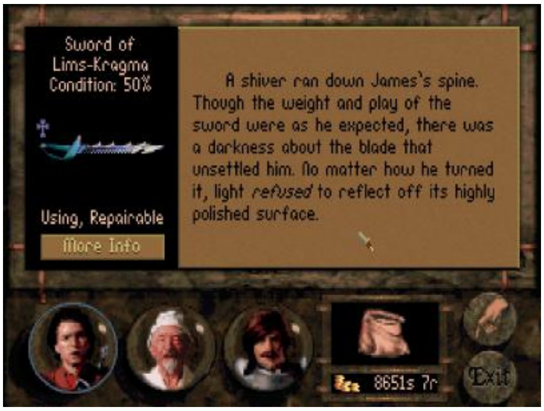
Betrayal at Krondor is, suffice it to say, quite possibly my favourite RPG of all time. When you think of most other role-playing games, you’ll always find yourself saying, “it’s a great one, but …”. In *Krondor*, there are no “buts”. This game is great through and through. It has no underdeveloped or bad sides, nor does it fall apart as it keeps going.

It’s the closest we’ve ever got to a perfect entry in the CRPG genre, and I’d be willing to fight you to the death to defend this statement. **DR**

While *Betrayal at Krondor* was based on Raymond E. Feist’s books, it’s actually a whole new story. It was later adapted by Feist into a novel called *Krondor: The Betrayal*.



Exploration is in first-person, and you’ll venture through caves and dungeons as well as the large overworld map

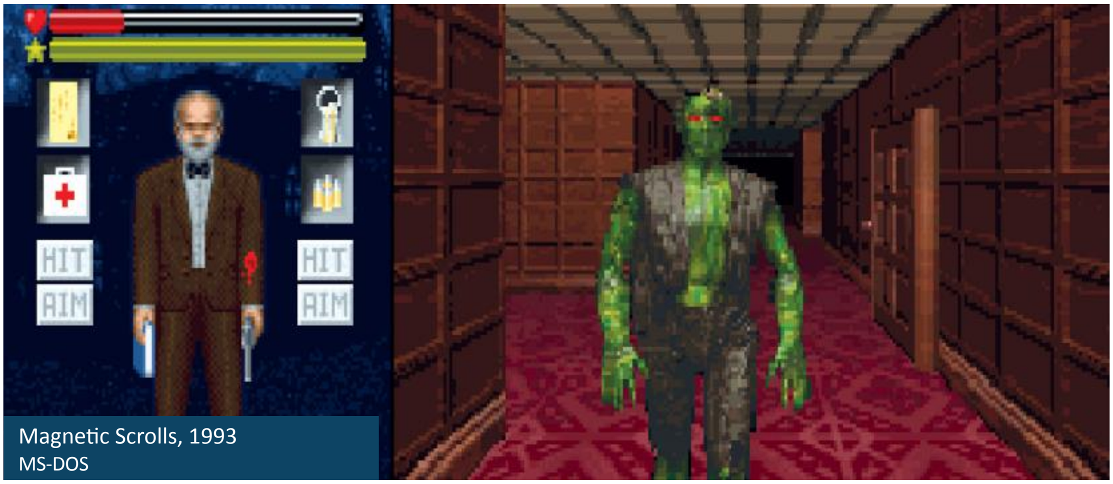


Sword of Lims-Kragma
Condition: 50%

A shiver ran down James's spine. Though the weight and play of the sword were as he expected, there was a darkness about the blade that unsettled him. No matter how he turned it, light *refused* to reflect off its highly polished surface.

Items, spells, weapons and actions are all presented in a book-like fashion, instead of the usual descriptive texts

The Legacy: Realm of Terror

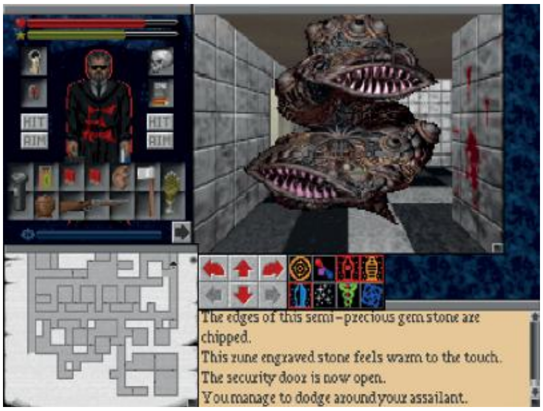


Magnetic Scrolls, 1993
MS-DOS

Magnetic Scrolls was a British company that developed many text adventure games during the ’80s, such as *The Pawn* (1985) and *The Guild of Thieves* (1987). *The Legacy* was their last game.

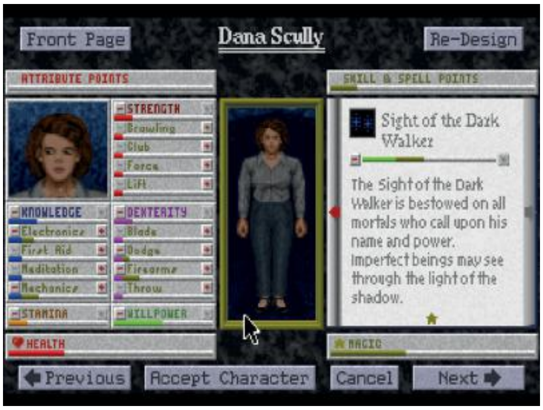
The Legacy casts you as the heir to a mansion. As soon as you enter it, the door locks itself, zombies infest the hallways and you begin to find disturbing notes detailing occult rituals.

If this sounds similar to *Alone in the Dark* (1992), released in the same year, that’s because it is. A lot. They even share a heavy Lovecraftian tone, even if the manual insists that *The Legacy* was inspired by Edgar Allan Poe’s *The Fall of the House of Usher*.



The edges of this semi-precious gemstone are chipped.
This rune engraved stone feels warm to the touch.
The security door is now open.
You manage to dodge around your assailant.

The visuals of the game were very advanced for the time, and the interface is based on resizeable windows that can be moved around



Sight of the Dark Walker

The Sight of the Dark Walker is bestowed on all mortals who call upon his name and power. Imperfect beings may see through the light of the shadow.

The Legacy presents several pre-made heirs for you to choose, such as a retired marine, a businesswoman or a journalist, but you can also create your own

However, while *Alone in the Dark* was about puzzle-solving and a few deadly monsters, *The Legacy* is an RPG. A dungeon crawler, to be precise. Each level is a twisting maze, filled with one-way doors, traps, teleporters and secrets – challenging to navigate even with the help of the on-screen mini-map.

Monsters are also plentiful. From zombies to extra-dimensional beings, be prepared to fight a lot. Combat is in real-time, much as in *Dungeon Master*, and each victory gives you XP to improve your stats and skills, but will likely also cost valuable resources.

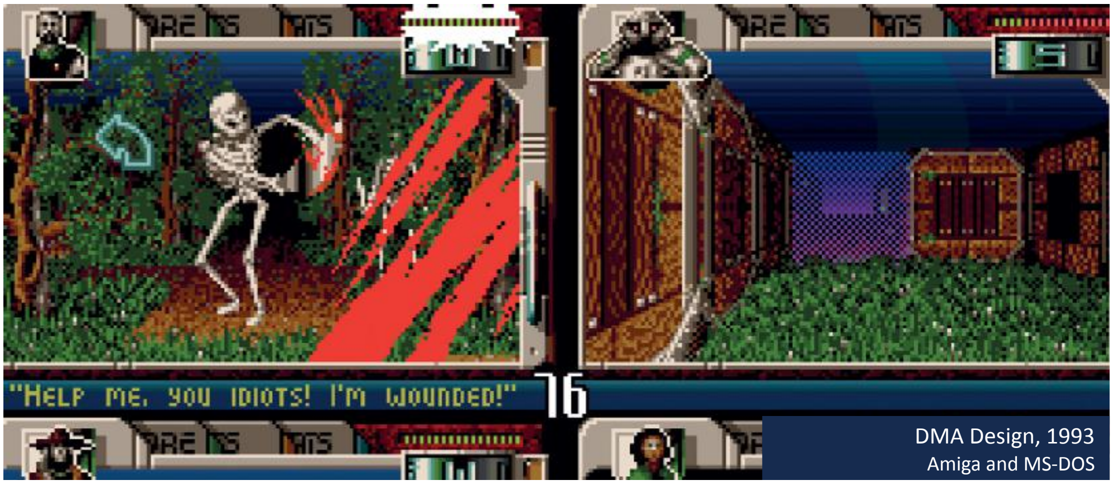
And that’s the challenge: resource management. Health items are extremely rare, as are bullets and crystals that restore magic power. You can rest to heal, but only at scarce safe areas – and sleeping makes you hungry, so you’re limited by food availability.

As such, *Realm of Terror* can be a difficult and frustrating game – one that might force you to load an old save file or even restart if you wasted too much ammo, magic or health early on and can’t proceed. Its first few hours can be punishing for newcomers, especially if they spend points on the “wrong” skills, but that’s also when the atmosphere is at its best – the game is quite good at surprising unsuspecting players.

Once you’re better prepared, the tension dims and inventory management becomes your main challenge. The game has dozens of weapons, items and puzzle pieces, but you can carry very few of them at one time. You’ll often find a puzzle and be forced to backtrack to grab its solution. Luckily, the monsters don’t respawn – if you managed to kill them.

Overall, *The Legacy* is an exotic and charming RPG, with presentation that’s ahead of its time and some tense moments. Some of that atmosphere vanishes once the Lovecraftian monsters become commonplace, but it’s a great title for dungeon-crawler fans. **FE**

Hired Guns



"HELP ME, YOU IDIOTS! I'M WOUNDED!"

DMA Design, 1993
Amiga and MS-DOS

Multiplayer RPGs released before the Internet came along are rare treasures. While they're often limited in some manner, they more than make up for it with the joy of not being alone in front of the computer.

Hired Guns is such a game, one that aims for those aspects of gaming: the companionship of friends and teamwork. This real-time dungeon crawler allows up to four players to squeeze in front of a single computer to control a band of mercenaries on a top-secret mission.

The game pays for its multiplayer focus by being a very "lite" RPG. There is no character creation process: players pick their merc(s) from the pool of 12 available characters, and besides included gear, three bare-bones stats and a Human/Droid race factor, there is nothing more to speak of in RPG terms. The XP only serves as a high score counter, nothing more.

What helps give each character an identity is their gear. The medic carries health kits and a stun gun, the combat droid lugs a mini-gun about and the mystery woman packs a plethora of psi-amps, the game's version of magic spells. These limited-use items do things like act as weapons, build bridges, teleport players and generally affect the terrain in various ways, and are often essential to completing each stage.

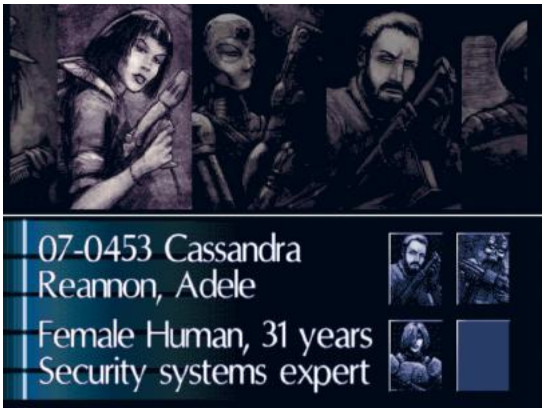
There are three game modes on offer: practice stages, single missions and the long story campaign. Gameplay in each one boils down to finding keys, killing baddies, solving environmental puzzles and reaching the exit, sometimes under a time limit.

In order to fit in the multiplayer the UI has been streamlined to a bare minimum: each character gets 25% of the screen, with tabs for their first-person view, inventory, stat page and map display. Playing with the mouse is surprisingly intuitive, but not so much with the keyboard and joystick.

Hired Guns is truly a case of "the more the merrier": playing alone has you control four mercs at once, while 2-player mode splits them evenly and 3 and 4 players get only one merc each, which is where the game truly shines.

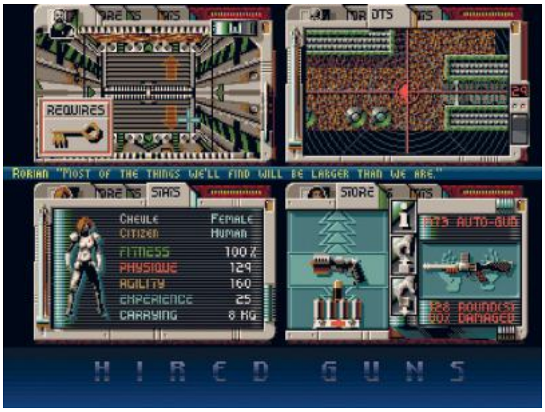
The campaign is long and challenging and I strongly advise tackling it with a couple of friends, just like I did in 1995, hence the fond memories I have of this game. **ÁV**

A reboot of *Hired Guns* was underway in the late '90s, as a multiplayer mission-based FPS. The game was cancelled, but a demo is still available for download.



07-0453 Cassandra
Reannon, Adele
Female Human, 31 years
Security systems expert

A character selection screen, showing one of the 12 playable mercenaries; each comes with unique stats and inventory

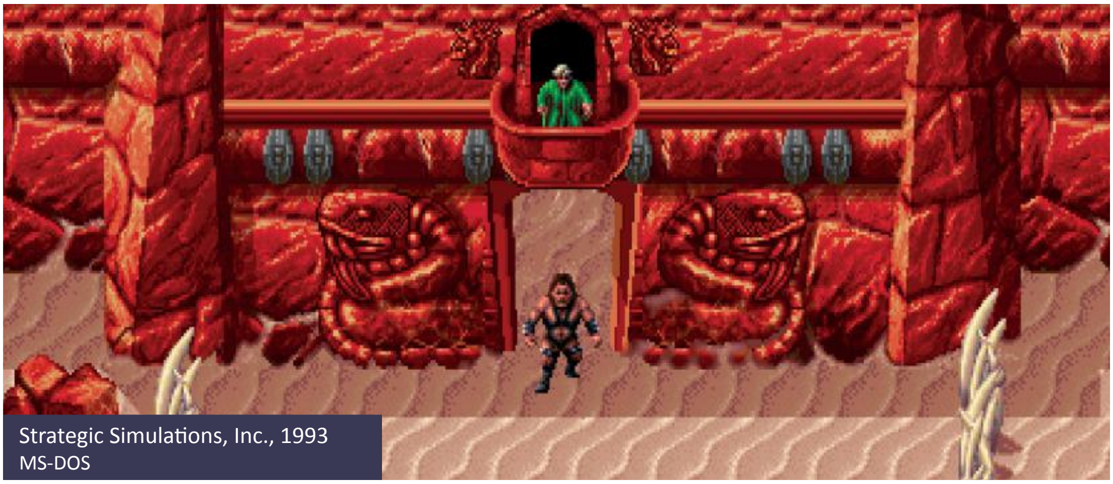


ROBIAN "MOST OF THE THINGS WE'LL FIND WILL BE LARGER THAN WE ARE."

CHEULE FEMALE
CITIZEN HUMAN
FITNESS 100%
PHYSIQUE 129
AGILITY 160
EXPERIENCE 25
CARRYING 8 KG

A four-player game in which each character is accessing a different screen: first-person view, map, stat screen and inventory

Dark Sun: Shattered Lands



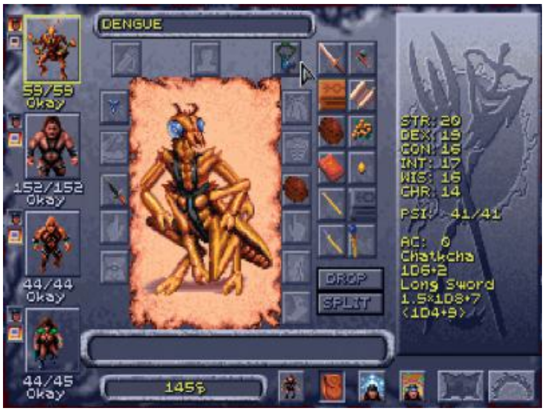
Strategic Simulations, Inc., 1993
MS-DOS

Athas, the world of *Dark Sun*, was once a planet full of life. It was turned into the desert by power-hungry, mad wizards thousands of years ago. Here we follow the story of four unlikely heroes, slowly rotting away in prison in the city-state Draj, awaiting their deaths in the gladiator arena. Will they rise and change the face of unforgiving Athas? Or will they become more forgotten souls whose corpses will be buried under the never-ending sea of sand?

The *Dark Sun* setting was quite popular in American prisons. TSR received a lot of fan mail from prisoners, who identified themselves with the slave gladiators.

The game starts with party creation. *Dark Sun* is an *AD&D* campaign setting, so things should be quite familiar. You choose the races of your characters, their alignments and professions, and adjust basic attributes like strength, dexterity and wisdom. There are no skills, feats or perks as we expect from the games of today.

There is, however, one thing that sets it apart from other RPG games of its time: Psionics. Each character has psionic abilities that allow them to disintegrate animate objects, absorb diseases or transform your arm into a weapon. Beware though, almost all intelligent creatures on Athas have such abilities, and they will not hesitate to use them.



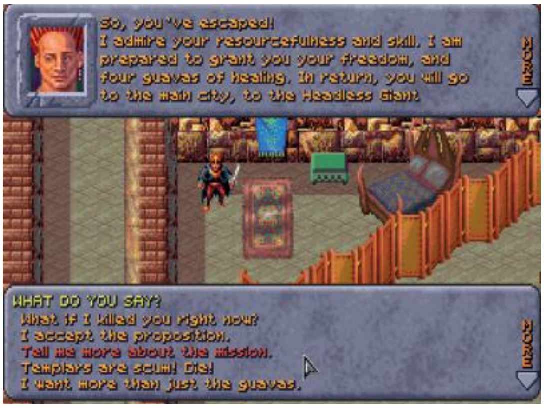
Dark Sun is an *AD&D* campaign setting, but its ruleset allows you to play with some exotic races and classes, such as a Thri-Kreen Psionicist, a Half-Giant Gladiator or a Mul Preserver

Your party begins as slave gladiators, forced to fight monsters to the death in the arena. The world of *Dark Sun* is presented in top-down, slightly isometric view, and fights are turn-based. The well-designed interface is entirely mouse-driven, presented with self-explanatory icons and is very easy to use.

In between the fights you wander around pens talking to their inhabitants, solving small puzzles and mini-quests. This is where you'll slowly notice some of the great elements of *Dark Sun*. The dialogues offer a great deal of text and many options for the players; most, if not all, of the quests have multiple solutions, allowing you to choose whichever approach you like.

Since you don't want to spend the rest of your days counting hay straws and occasionally fighting for the amusement of Average Joe, you need to escape. If you want to use the brute-force approach you can hack your way out, even teaming up with another gang; or if you want to avoid confrontation altogether you can try to bribe the Templars. This gives the game an enormous amount of replayability. You can play *Dark Sun* over and over and you will always find new quests and new ways to complete them.

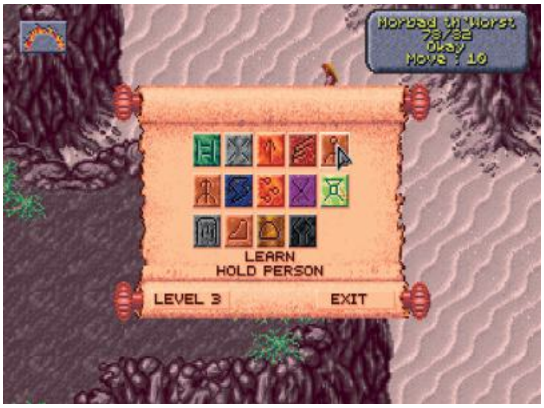
After escaping the pens, the main quest begins: to rally the free villages in a fight against the mighty army of city-state Draj. They are preparing a military campaign that is supposed to wipe out all ex-slaves. This is another example of where *Dark Sun* shines: its openness and non-linearity. You want to help all villages, or none at all and face the army by yourself? You can! Want to investigate a remote cave, visit the travelling caravan or go deep into the lair of a mad wizard? It's up to you where to start and where to go next. The game is divided into over 30 areas, each a huge open space with many quests, adding to a nice 40+ hours of gameplay.



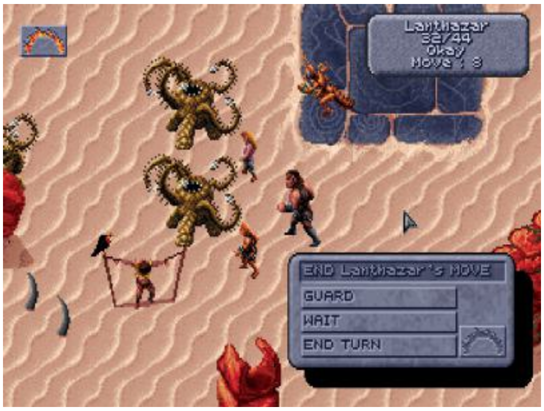
So, you've escaped!
I admire your resourcefulness and skill. I am prepared to grant you your freedom, and four guavas of healing. In return, you will go to the main city, to the Headless Giant

WHAT DO YOU SAY?
What if I killed you right now?
I accept the proposition.
Tell me more about the mission.
Templars are scum! Die!
I want more than just the guavas.

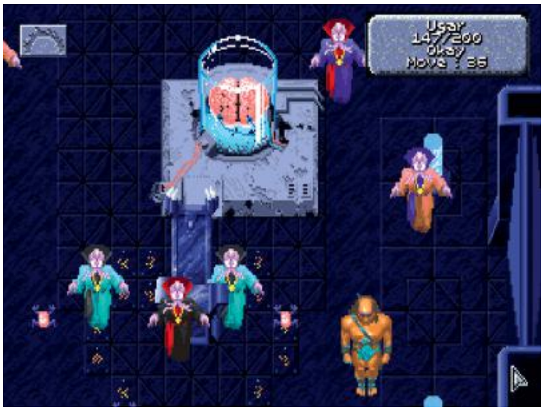
Dark Sun's dialogue looks average today, but it was novel at the time, offering players plenty of text and options



Every character in *Dark Sun* can use Psionics, but you'll also see many of the traditional *AD&D* spells



The combat system is turn-based, using the *AD&D* ruleset, but the UI keeps things simple and accessible



The sequel, *Wake of the Ravager,* expanded the game in every sense, unfortunately including the number of bugs

While exploring the game areas you'll face many adversaries. There will be zombies and spiders, but these are just a nuisance. The real test of your skills will be fighting extra-planar Tanar'ri, 15-foot-tall Mountain Stalkers or the huge Mastyrial scorpions. And it's not only the fauna that wants to kill you. Forget what you learned about fantasy races from all the Tolkien-derived worlds out there – here Halflings are xenophobic cannibals, Elves are honourless nomads and none of the other races are any better.

Graphically, *Shattered Lands* is very pretty, with nicely drawn environments, each area with its own distinctive look, feel and unique variety of monsters. Unfortunately the game is set back by low-quality animations and numerous bugs. While I have not encountered a critical one, there have been occasional hiccups where I had to restart the quest or go back to previous save positions.

The story continues in the follow-up game, *Wake of the Ravager* (1994). Our heroes arrive at the city of Tyr and need to stop the coming of the dragon.

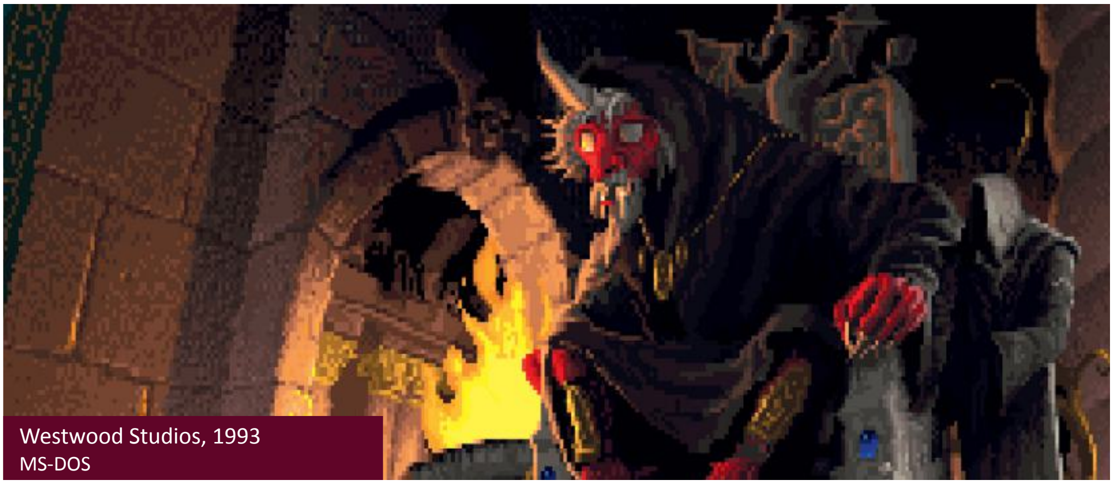
In short, *Ravager* is bigger, louder and much more buggy. Sprites got much bigger, animations were improved and the overall mood became much grittier and darker. The atmosphere was improved by voiced dialogue, new cutscenes and a great CD-audio soundtrack. Sadly, some of the bugs were game-breaking and you could face a complete restart of your game due to an inability to finish one of the main quests.

The *Dark Sun* saga was concluded in *Dark Sun Online: Crimson Sands* (1996), a short-lived online RPG, preceding the likes of *Ultima Online*. Its brief history is one plagued with development and budget issues, many bugs, and rampant cheating by players.

Dark Sun: Shattered Lands was supposed to be a breakthrough for SSI, but it was plagued by bugs and delayed releases. Furthermore, the game was the product of a transitional era – ahead of its peers in many aspects, such as the UI, the open areas, the dialogue, and the multiple quest solutions, while also struggling with how to implement these features. Give *Dark Sun* a spin, you won't be disappointed. **BM**

You can transfer your party from *Shattered Lands* to *Wake of the Ravager*. This, however, will cause all enemies to have twice the HP, which will make the game really hard.

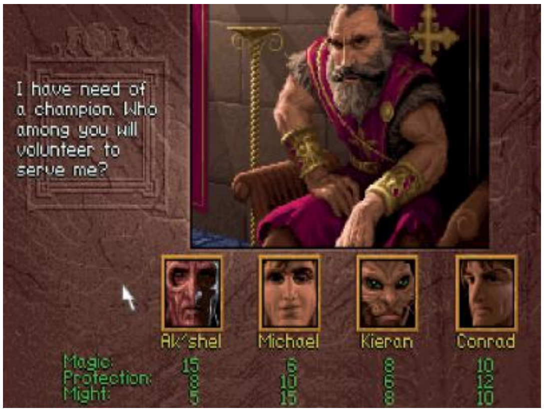
Lands of Lore:
The Throne of Chaos



Westwood Studios, 1993
MS-DOS

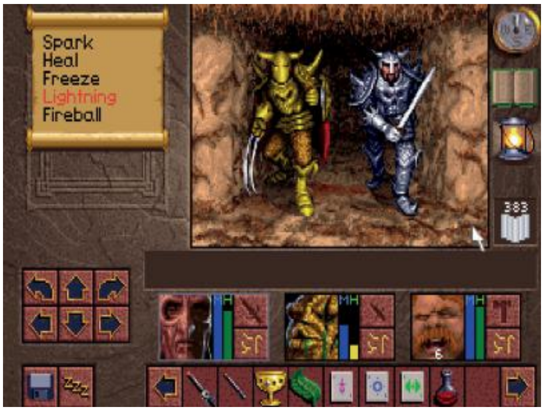
Westwood Associates had a great run with SSI's *Eye of the Beholder* and its sequel, before Virgin Interactive snatched them up in 1992, renaming the development house Westwood Studios. In 1993, this experience was put to good use with *Lands of Lore: The Throne of Chaos*.

Now free to build their own rules, they took the *AD&D* crunch found in *EotB* and tried to make it less intimidating, while providing no less of a challenge.



I have need of a champion. Who among you will volunteer to serve me?

First released on floppy disks, *Lands of Lore* got a CD-ROM version in 1994 that made the game fully-voiced. English actor Patrick Stewart was hired to voice the king



The game's impressive pixel art is full of little details, such as how the characters' portraits reflect their injuries

Much like titles from the Gold Box and *Ultima* series, the game came with a more technical manual explaining the interface and a separate book containing the fiction. The latter detailed the evil of Scotia and her Dark Army, and a short, mythic history of the land that laid out the foundations for Westwood's new world.

Players choose one of four heroes to take up the quest, each with their own strengths and weaknesses, from the scaly Ak'shel and his magic to the roguish Kierean, the well-rounded Conrad or the straight-up basher Michael. Up to two NPCs could eventually also join your chosen hero, making it more of a blobber experience.

Attributes have been cut down to two catch-all bins – Might and Protection; skills are similarly placed in three major categories – Fighter, Rogue and Mage. But instead of using experience points to determine your character's development, *Lands of Lore* followed the example of titles such as *Dungeon Master* in making it so that using the actions most associated with each character improves them over time.

The game is also relatively linear, as you fight through one zone after the next during the quest, but the first-person 3D world Westwood put together is like *EotB* on pixellised steroids. Outdoor areas, towns, and traditional dungeons peppered with traps, hidden switches, beasts that can dissolve weapons or disarm players, and interactive NPCs celebrated Westwood's last dalliance with grid-based dungeon crawling, all automapped for your pleasure.

Tough, brutal encounters and dungeons later in the game are offset only by the ability to rest anywhere, but *Lands of Lore* knows when to take the gloves off, punishing unprepared players despite its deceptive simplicity. It's a formula that holds up well even today, and a crawl still worth delving into. **RE**

Dungeon Hack

An ancient dungeon, and within it lies the orb.

DreamForge Intertainment, 1993
MS-DOS

Dungeon Hack is, sadly, a good idea poorly implemented. The game employs a reworked version of the *Eye of the Beholder* engine to create a real-time single-character graphical Roguelike that allows you to customise its random dungeons. It also offers some new features, such as the addition of an automap and a new class – the Bard.

However, making it a real-time single-character Roguelike that uses the *AD&D* 2nd edition rules is also what virtually damns it.

Dungeon Hack is a very straightforward Roguelike, in which you descend through a dungeon without any shops or rest stops along the way, killing monsters and finding loot in a randomly-generated labyrinth with simple puzzles normally involving putting a dozen keys into a dozen types of door until you find or kill the objective at the bottom of it.

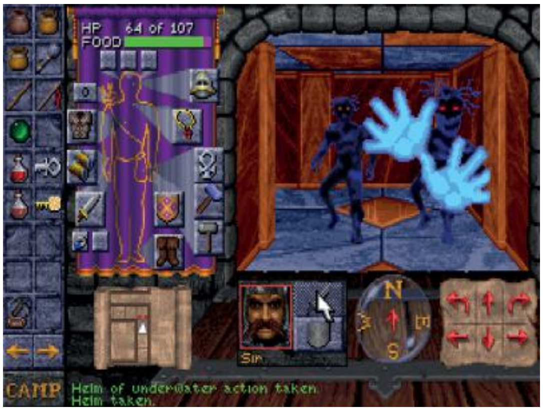
Along the way you'll battle some of the over fifty monsters present in the game – including liches and invisible feyrs – and face hazards such as underwater levels, anti-magic fields and starvation.

Yet between the over-reliance on die rolls, the awkward challenge of quickly controlling your actions in real time and its *AD&D* adaptation, having a properly fun time is distressingly just out of range.

Given that TSR's *AD&D* rules are designed for turn- and party-based RPG combat, it should be no surprise that they are troublesome in a game built around a single character exploring a dungeon in real time. There was no effort made to adapt the rules, so classes such as the Bard, Mage and Thief are practically useless, as the game hardly provides any benefit to playing them. Most locked objects require specific keys, and the combination of real-time combat with a slow spell interface make the Mage virtually useless and easily killed.

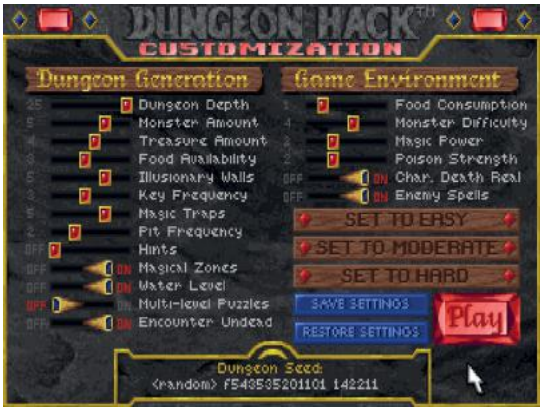
Had *Dungeon Hack* been a party-based Roguelike, the issues with its constant "Save or Die" elements would have been lessened, and more than a handful of character builds would be genuinely viable.

As it stands, the game is only worth trying if you are a big fan of the Roguelike genre, willing to overlook the obvious gameplay flaws. It's just sad that the concept behind *Dungeon Hack* had so much more potential than the game was able to deliver. **RM**



Helm of underwater action taken.
Helm taken.

The graphics are an improvement over the already excellent *Eye of the Beholder*, and the added mini-map is also welcome



25 Dungeon Depth
5 Monster Amount
4 Treasure Amount
3 Food Availability
5 Illusionary Walls
3 Key Frequency
5 Magic Traps
2 Pit Frequency
OFF Hints
OFF ON Magical Zones
OFF ON Water Level
OFF ON Multi-level Puzzles
OFF ON Encounter Undead

1 Food Consumption
4 Monster Difficulty
2 Magic Power
2 Poison Strength
OFF ON Char. Death Real
OFF ON Enemy Spells

Dungeon Seed:
<random> f543535201101 142211

One nice touch is being able to customise the random dungeon and then share it with your friends; you can also get rid of boring, level-draining undead

Forgotten Realms: Unlimited Adventures

UNLIMITED ADVENTURES

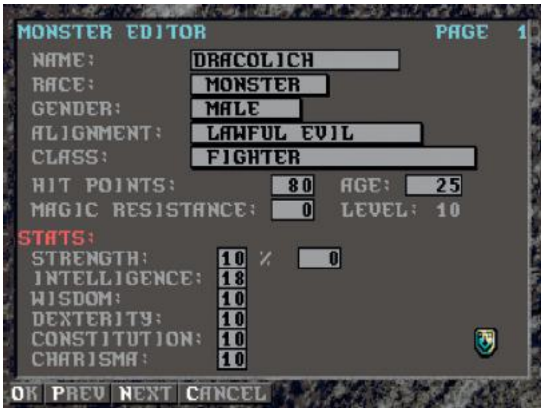
Strategic Simulations, Inc., 1993
MS-DOS and Mac

The popular Gold Box series began in 1988 with *Pool of Radiance* and after six years, twelve games and several big changes in the industry, it was showing its age. SSI decided to conclude the series with *Forgotten Realms: Unlimited Adventures* (*FRUA*), a toolset intended to allow aspiring designers to create their own Gold Box-like games, replicating most of the functions that existed in the core games.

You can check the Unlimited Adventures Hall of Fame to learn all about *FRUA's* most popular modules, then download the modules from frua.rosedragon.org.

At first, *FRUA* had some hard limitations on what could be changed, but they were eventually overcome with the use of hacks such as *UAShell*. These allowed a designer to introduce a multitude of changes to the default *Dungeons & Dragons* modules and create other styles. Since the toolset's release, *FRUA* designers have developed all kinds of fantasy modules, as well as science fiction, cyberpunk, horror, humour, superhero and even anime-style modules.

Over the years, a community of devoted followers has sprung up around the *FRUA* toolset. This collection of designers, hackers and players continually keep new innovations and modules (also referred to as "designs") coming out at a regular intervals.


MONSTER EDITOR PAGE 1
NAME: DRACOLICH
RACE: MONSTER
GENDER: MALE
ALIGNMENT: LAWFUL EVIL
CLASS: FIGHTER
HIT POINTS: 80 AGE: 25
MAGIC RESISTANCE: 0 LEVEL: 10
STATS:
STRENGTH: 10 % 0
INTELLIGENCE: 18
WISDOM: 10
DEXTERITY: 10
CONSTITUTION: 10
CHARISMA: 10

While *FRUA* was somewhat limited at first, players have since created tools allowing for custom classes, races, stats, artwork and music

The community hosts a forum at www.ua.reonis.com, releases an occasional newsletter and even holds module creation contests based upon various themes. They post reviews of modules, both new and old, in order to help new community members find the best-quality scenarios to suit their needs.

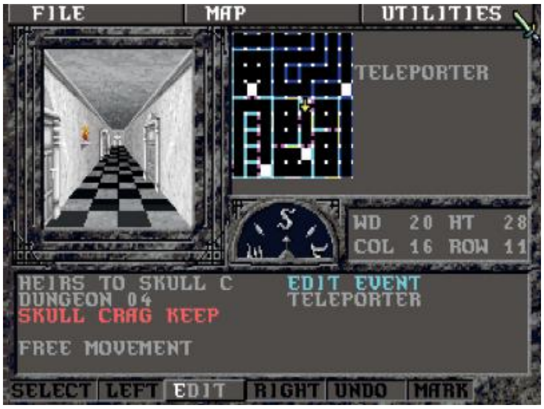
No mention of *FRUA* could be complete without a discussion of the actual modules created for it. Many of them rival the original Gold Box series of games in design, scope and ambition.

Those looking to stick with *D&D* need look no further than Ray Dyer's massive "*Realm*" series. This group of 40+ modules translates many popular *AD&D* tabletop modules into playable *FRUA* scenarios. Everything from "*The Keep on the Borderlands*" through "*The Temple of Elemental Evil*" to a remake of "*Pool of Radiance*" can be found within *Realm*.

Original *AD&D*-style modules exist as well, including Ben Jockish's "*The Sect*," John Rudy's "*The Guild*" and Ben Sanderfer's "*AT1: Dark Alliances*". These adventures can take players through Dragonlance, the Forgotten Realms, Greyhawk or any number of *AD&D*'s established worlds, and anyone who wants to roll up a party and delve into deep dungeons looking for treasure is likely to find a lot to love.

Science fiction modules are less prevalent but still popular, with several of them being based upon Buck Rogers (in the style of the SSI's *Buck Rogers* games). Harri Polsa has created a series of sci-fi modules around his main character, Millar Jade Vanderholle, though they have met with some controversy due their explicit sexual nature.

All modules are classified as either "Vanilla", which uses only *FRUA*'s assets, "French Vanilla", which adds new artwork, or "Hacked", which has extensive changes and requires the use of the *UAShell* mod.



TELEPORTER

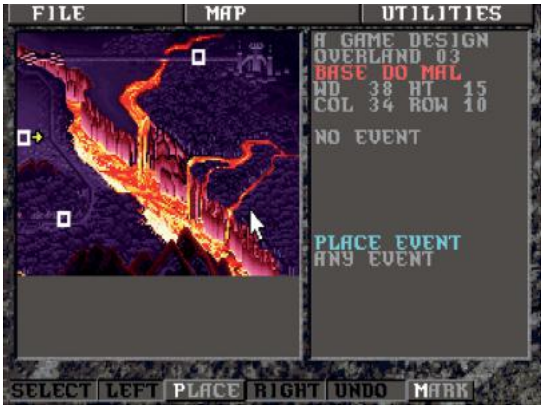
WD 20 HT 28
COL 16 ROW 11

HEIRS TO SKULL C
DUNGEON 04
SKULL CRAG KEEP

FREE MOVEMENT

EDIT EVENT
TELEPORTER

Areas are 24 × 24 squares in size and can have multiple tilesets at once, making for large and diverse dungeons

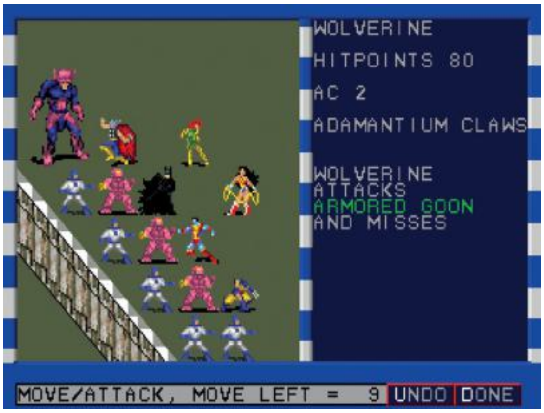


A GAME DESIGN
OVERLAND 03
BASE DO MAL
WD 38 HT 15
COL 34 ROW 10

NO EVENT

PLACE EVENT
ANY EVENT

Besides the first-person exploration, you can also create overland maps with events and random encounters

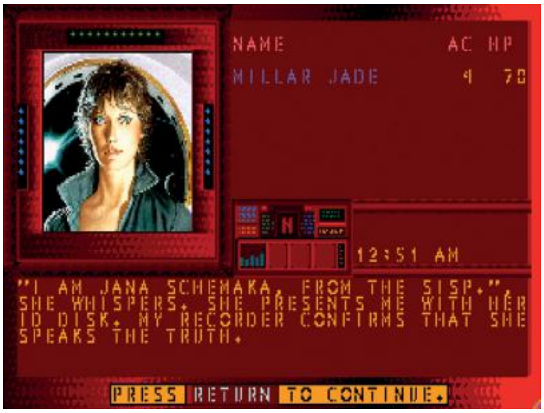


WOLVERINE
HITPOINTS 80
AC 2
ADAMANTIUM CLAWS

WOLVERINE
ATTACKS
ARMORED GOON
AND MISSES

MOVE/ATTACK, MOVE LEFT = 9

"Hacked" modules use *UAShell* to provide more flexibility, allowing them to modify *FRUA*'s rules and appearance



NAME	AC	HP
MILLAR JADE	4	70

12:51 AM

"I AM JANA SCHEMAKA, FROM THE SISP," SHE WHISPERS. SHE PRESENTS ME WITH HER ID DISK. MY RECORDER CONFIRMS THAT SHE SPEAKS THE TRUTH.

Some modules have a bigger focus on storytelling and provide a pre-made character for players to use

It should also be mentioned that, while intended primarily as a tool to create scenarios, *FRUA* did ship with a sample adventure called "*Heirs to Skull Crag*", a forgotten 13th entry in the Gold Box line-up. However, its reviews have been less than favourable in comparison to the SSI classics that preceded it.

Given the limitations of *FRUA*, it was only a matter of time before someone began work on a sequel to the toolset in order to remove those limitations.

In development since 1995, *Dungeon Craft* has seen several modules released for it. The advantages of this toolset include being able to run natively in Windows, the use of high-resolution artwork and having an unlimited number of events and art assets. The disadvantage is not being compatible with *FRUA* modules. The engine is open-source, and still under development, with a large following all of its own.

Another spiritual successor, the *IceBlink Engine*, was kickstarted in 2012. Combining parts of *FRUA* and BioWare's *Neverwinter Nights*, it can be used to create modules for both Windows and Android systems. It is still lacking in features, but its future looks promising.

Despite developments on these systems, though, there still remains a hardcore following for *FRUA* and its modules. New breakthroughs in hacking the engine continue to be made, and designers find new ways to excite players through the inventive use of artwork and storytelling. For a toolset that is nearly 25 years old, *FRUA* has stood the test of time.

As members of the community like to say, so long as there are adventures to be played, there will be someone there to play them. And so long as there are stories left to tell, there will be someone there to create them. **BE**

Mods:

UAShell: An important tool that applies the hacks within a module's directory, such as custom art and music, then reverses those same hacks when the player is done. It contains several tools to help designers effect changes within the *FRUA* engine, so running a hacked module without *UAShell* can lead to strange results and even the odd bug or crash.

SSI abandoned *FRUA* within a year of release, leaving some bugs behind. The *FRUA* community has since released their own unofficial 1.3 patch, fixing several issues.

Ultima VIII: Pagan

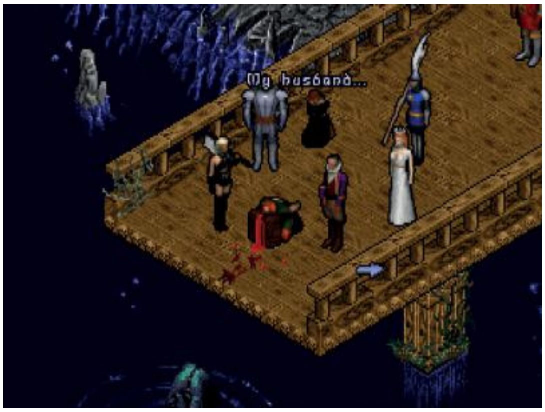
Origin Systems, 1994
MS-DOS (Windows, Mac and Linux)*

***Pentagram* is a fan-made open-source program that enables *Pagan* to run on modern computers.**

Ultima VIII: Pagan is overall the 13th game to bear the *Ultima* name, and it is one of the franchise's most controversial entries. Rushed out, the game contains much that was scaled back, cut, or – at worst – left unfinished.

The material that remained unscathed in the game suffers from a strangely disjointed sense of direction, as if competing development ideologies failed to be hammered into a cogent whole. A dark – at times even morbid – tale of Machiavellian ethics and moral expediency contrasts sharply with an inexplicable focus on jumping mechanics and *Super Mario*-esque platforming – leading some to derisively dub the game "Super Avatar Bros".

Yet despite its monumental development woes and lack of overarching direction, *Ultima VIII* remains a compelling and distinct entry in the *Ultima* series – foreboding, unfamiliar, viciously morally ambiguous, and possessed of a truly unsettling, claustrophobic atmosphere. Had it been given the care it deserved, it may have proven a worthy successor even to the mighty *Ultima VII* duology.



You witness an execution as soon as you arrive, setting the grim tone of the game; no-one knows about the Avatar here, and they won't hesitate to execute you

Instead, it is an enduring testament to the way in which the business side of the gaming industry can cripple a promising project – a hard lesson, and unfortunately still a very relevant one today.

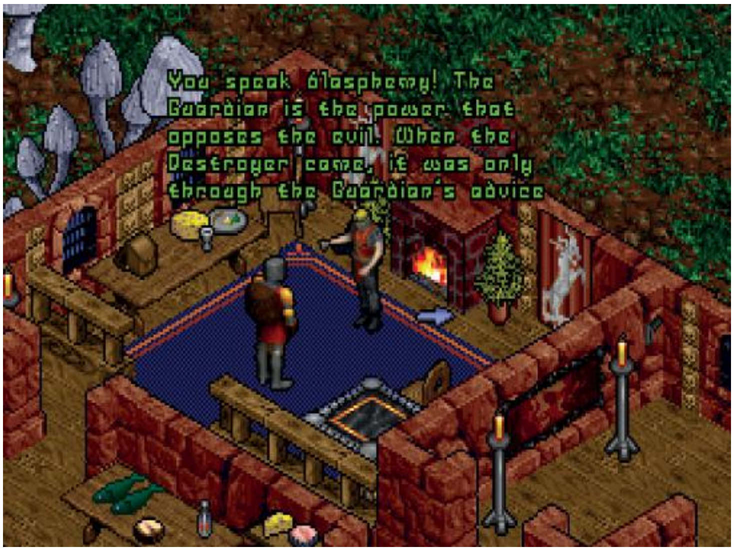
The narrative of *Ultima VIII* begins directly where *Ultima VII: Serpent Isle* ends. The Avatar finds himself helpless in the hands of the Guardian, an evil invading deity hell-bent on conquering the Avatar's adopted fatherland, Britannia. In order to punish the Avatar for continually meddling in his plans, the Guardian exiles him to the eponymous Pagan, a barren land of darkness. From there, the Avatar must search for a way to return to Britannia – all along in a desperate race against time, as the Guardian has already begun his grim conquest.

Though *Ultima VIII*'s story functions as a direct continuation of the *Ultima VII* duology, the gameplay mechanics are substantially different from its two immediate predecessors – and even, to varying extents, from any of the previous games in the series. Gone is the slant-overhead camera perspective of *Ultima VII* – *Ultima VIII* was the first, and is currently the only, game in the series to have a pure 3D-isometric perspective. The Avatar's companions, iconic party members present even in the earliest games, are missing for the first time – the Avatar must journey alone.

The turn-based, battle-scene combat of earlier *Ultima* games had already been simplified in *Ultima VII* into a more fluid, real-time action system; in *Ultima VIII*, that system was even further simplified – some would say devolved – into what is, for all intents and purposes, hack-and-slash combat.

The magic system from *Ultima VII* was also overhauled – spells now require a lot more effort and time to cast, arguably marginalising them in favour of weapon-based attacks.

> "With *Ultima VIII*, I wanted to be even more severe with the sinister elements. That's where your character went off to the land of Pagan, which was the Guardian's home world. This world wasn't your standard, virtuous goody-goody-two-shoes setting, to the point where, if you tried to uphold the goody-goody-two-shoes life in the game, you couldn't get anywhere."
>
> *– Richard Garriott,*
> Ultima VIII: Pagan*'s producer*



You speak blasphemy! The Guardian is the power that opposes the evil! When the Destroyer came, it was only through the Guardian's advice

The Guardian is worshipped in Pagan and his voice constantly taunts you, providing false hints, laughing at your actions and describing how he's destroying Britannia

The newly added platforming sequences are a chore by any metric, but the initial release of the game coupled them with absolutely horrific jump controls, clunky enough to be virtually broken. The initial uproar caused by these jump mechanics was so vehement that EA released a patch altering them into a significantly more manageable endeavour.

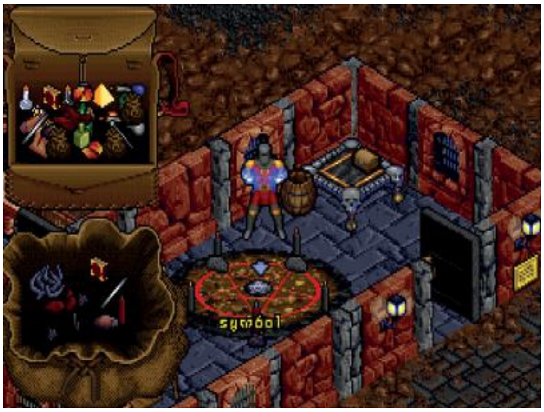
So – with all of these caveats, flaws, questionable design choices, and development woes, what worth does *Ultima VIII* offer? For one, the atmosphere holds up incredibly well. Despite the many cuts and revisions, the developers have still managed to craft a compelling, alien world, full of oppressive dread and an inescapable sense of vulnerability. The Avatar is a stranger in Pagan, and the player, too, is meant to feel like a stranger – alienated from the grim, featureless landscape, the vile NPCs, and even from the Avatar, who commits progressively more uncomfortable atrocities in his urge to return to Britannia.

Even today, *Ultima VIII*'s depictions of bloody human sacrifice and demon summoning can still provoke shock and disgust. The narrative – though fraught with plot holes, dropped arcs and other inconsistencies – nevertheless communicates its main theme quite viscerally: that the Avatar, in pursuit of his own "just" ends, is systematically perverting and shattering his own code of virtues.

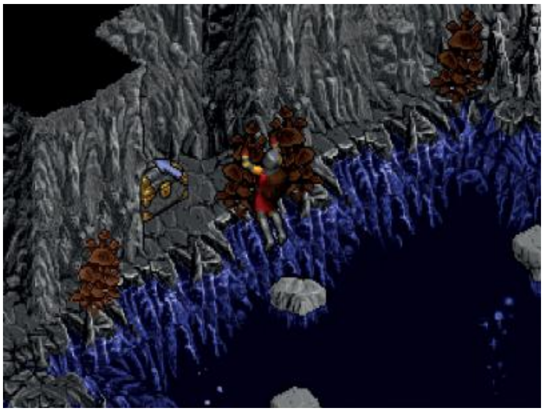
At the game's conclusion, it is clear that the Avatar's victory is Pyrrhic at best; and at worst, it is not a victory at all, but rather the final collapse of a moral code that the Avatar has spent many *Ultima* games striving to uphold and protect.

Ultima VIII is a very disappointing example of squandered potential. And yet, beneath all of its faults and missteps, there lies within it an important philosophical counterpoint to the naive optimism of *Ultima IV*: take care that you do not abandon your virtues, even in pursuit of the greater good. **CR**

An expansion called *The Lost Vale* and a CD-ROM enhanced version were planned, but both were cancelled due to poor sales. Read more about *The Lost Vale* on page 636.



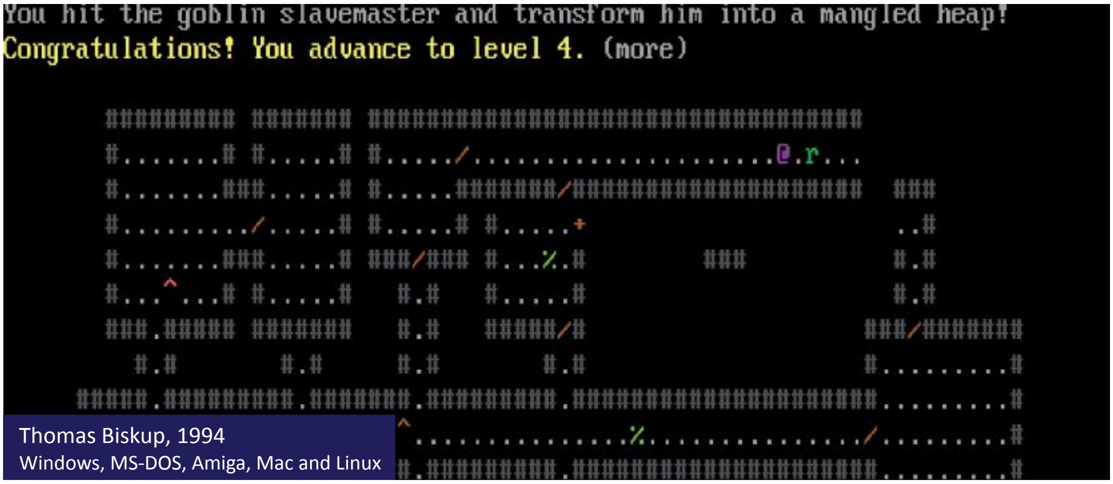
Each school of magic has a different way of preparing spells – such as arranging reagents on a pentagram



To jump, you must press both mouse buttons at once: I assure you, it's even more awkward than it sounds

ADOM

Ancient Domains of Mystery



```
You hit the goblin slavemaster and transform him into a mangled heap!
Congratulations! You advance to level 4. (more)
```

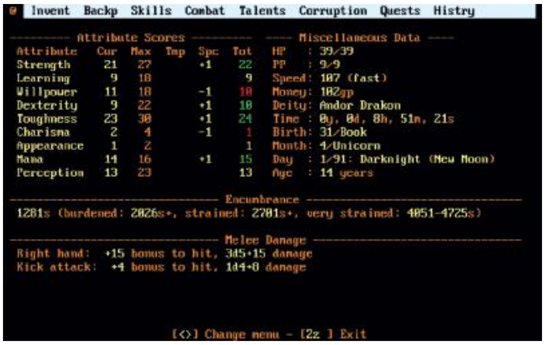
Thomas Biskup, 1994
Windows, MS-DOS, Amiga, Mac and Linux

I was lucky enough to have a home computer in the early ’80s. I learned how to read and type by playing interactive fiction games and Roguelikes. The high difficulty and complexity of those early Roguelikes means that many of them have been fixtures in my life for decades, and of those early Roguelikes, *ADOM (Ancient Domains of Mystery)* has meant the most to me over the years. The first release of ADOM was in 1994, and development continued until 2002. In 2012, development resumed, following a successful crowd-funding campaign.

Thomas Biskup created an Indiegogo campaign in 2012 to fund a ‘rebirth’ of *ADOM’s* development. It raised $90,000 and led to the release of a 2021 sequel called *Ultimate ADOM - Caverns of Chaos*.

The first time I played *ADOM*, it felt like a missing connection between interactive fiction and Roguelikes. Interactive fiction games (the early *Zork* games and *Colossal Cave Adventure* tend to be the most enduring examples) give you the feeling you’re exploring real places: handwritten stories embroidered with puzzles, and rooms furnished with enough clues to solve those puzzles but written to suggest a lived-in world beyond that room.

Rogue, the game that gave Roguelikes their name, was an attempt to solve a specific problem with interactive fiction: once you figured out the puzzles, there was little incentive to play them again (beyond the comfort of returning to a beloved film or novel).



```
-------- Attribute Scores ---------      ---- Miscellaneous Data ----
Attribute    Cur  Max  Tmp  Spc  Tot     HP    : 39/39
Strength      21   27        +1   22     PP    : 9/9
Learning       9   18              9     Speed: 107 (fast)
Willpower     11   18        -1   10     Money: 102gp
Dexterity      9   22        +1   10     Deity: Andor Drakon
Toughness     23   30        +1   24     Time  : 0y, 0d, 8h, 51m, 21s
Charisma       2    4        -1    1     Birth: 31/Book
Appearance     1    2              1     Month: 4/Unicorn
Mana          14   16        +1   15     Day   : 1/91: Darknight (New Moon)
Perception    13   23             13     Age   : 14 years

------------------------------ Encumbrance ------------------------------
1281s (burdened: 2026s+, strained: 2701s+, very strained: 4051-4725s)

------------------------------ Melee Damage ------------------------------
Right hand:   +15 bonus to hit, 3d5+15 damage
Kick attack:   +4 bonus to hit, 1d4+0 damage

                     [<>] Change menu - [2z ] Exit
```

ADOM uses nine main stats and has over 40 skills you can level up and train for, as well as a corruption system which incurs random mutations, such as gills or acid blood

The way that Roguelikes tried to solve the problem was to focus on procedural generation: the task of world-building was collapsed into algorithms that would build it anew every time the player embarked on a new quest. However, in the quest to produce the perfect “forever” game, most of the world-building was given over to the cold, thrashing jaws of procedural generation.

ADOM differentiates itself from other Roguelikes right from the start: before players begin the game, they are invited to “Embark on the Postcard Adventure” – an option on the main menu that lists Thomas Biskup’s home address with the simple request to send him a postcard if they enjoyed *ADOM*. It’s a remarkably human gesture in a genre of game that established itself as a vector for cold machine logic.

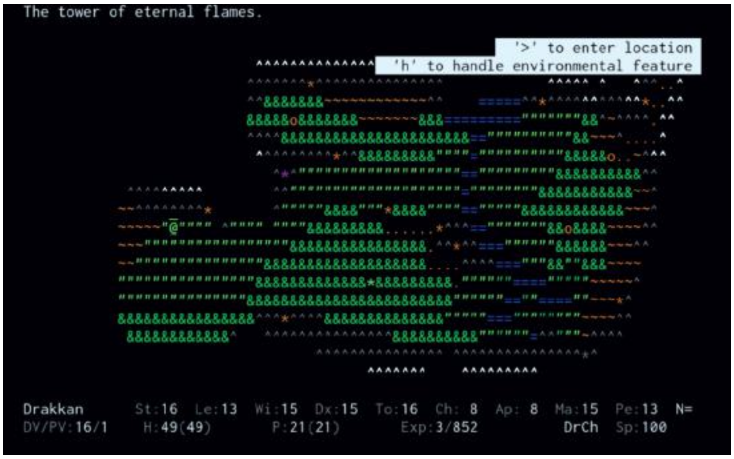
During character creation, there are 12 races and over 20 classes to choose from. Certainly, some combinations are more effective than others, but the game will let you pick any combination you want. In keeping with the concerns that motivated *Rogue*, the choices you make during character creation will have a major impact on how the game plays out.

Once you’ve created your character, a short passage describing your upbringing is generated, populated with some events that relate to your race and class. It’s a brilliant way to prime players, something that later Roguelikes would replicate and build upon to great effect.

After this, *ADOM* does what made me fall in love with it, something that cut against the established orthodoxy of Roguelikes up until that point: *ADOM* drops you right into the mountainous Drakalor Chain of the world of Ancardia; not the top floor of an astonishingly deep dungeon, but a whole corner of the world, full of caves and towns and dungeons.

"*ADOM* was inspired by several Roguelike games: most prominently *NetHack, Angband* as far as early visualisations go and *Omega* for the wilderness area. The commercial RPG *Wasteland* (IMHO still the best computer RPG ever) was the prime sample as far as open storytelling goes, the pen-and-paper RPG *Warhammer* provided the inspiration for Chaos and Corruption."

– Thomas Biskup,
ADOM's creator



```
The tower of eternal flames.

'>' to enter location
'h' to handle environmental feature

Drakkan      St:16  Le:13  Wi:15  Dx:15  To:16  Ch: 8  Ap: 8  Ma:15  Pe:13  N=
DV/PV:16/1    H:49(49)       P:21(21)       Exp:3/852        DrCh  Sp:100
```

ADOM's fixed worldmap was inspired by that of another Roguelike, *Omega* (1988), and sets it apart from other Roguelikes

While dungeons are procedurally generated, the overworld in *ADOM* remains static. The starting town, Terinyo, is always in the same spot, as are the dungeons. Ancardia is a lived-in mess of a place, with quests to complete and people to meet. The quests come in a range of flavours: many require the player to kill a monster somewhere, some are epic, world-changing fare – stop (or join) the chaos that threatens all of Ancardia – and, to my delight, a few are cheerfully banal: save a cute puppy at the bottom of a dungeon.

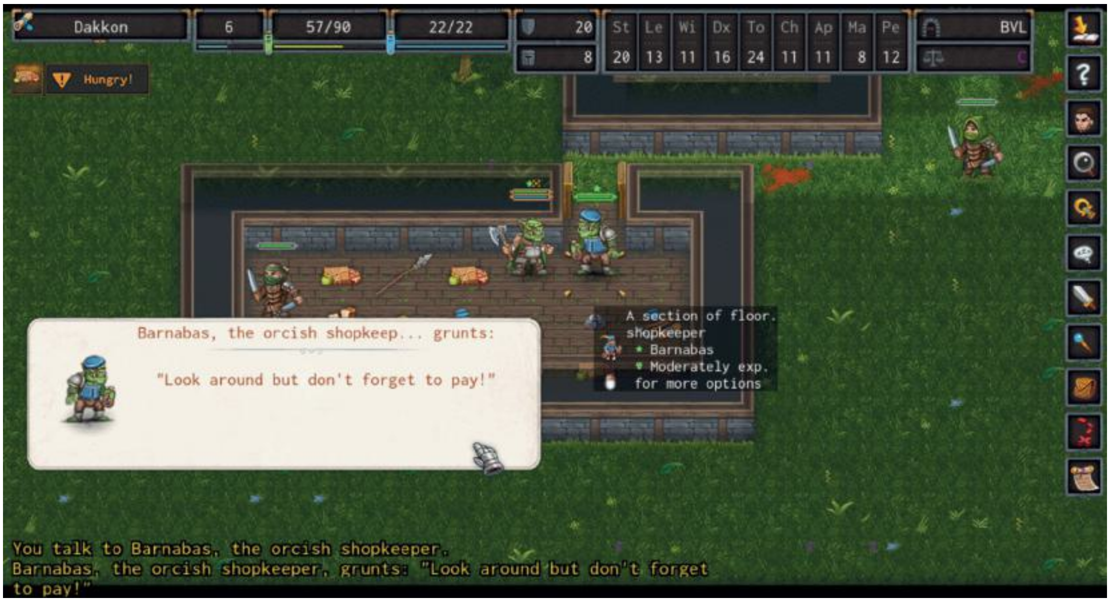
ADOM is an important game in the Roguelike canon, but what does that mean to someone who hasn't followed the genre for decades? At the time of writing, Biskup has made good on his promise to implement graphical tiles and release the game on Steam. He has added an indispensable tutorial mode and a range of difficulty options, making *ADOM* one of the most accessible traditional Roguelikes on the market.

Many traditional Roguelikes, for all their procedurally-generated content and complexity, still dabble with handcrafted sections, but that authored content is often exclusively focused on small puzzles that are disconnected from a wider world.

If you are not already sold on banging your head against a vertical difficulty curve, there's little there to motivate you to stay; very few of those early Roguelikes care about the stakes of a wider world beyond their dungeons.

ADOM's gambit is that there are wider stakes than simply getting the MacGuffin or killing the evil in the dungeon. It's no surprise that *ADOM*'s design decisions inspired some truly phenomenal modern Roguelikes, such as *Caves of Qud* (2010) and *Tales of Maj'Eyal* (2012). But what really makes *ADOM* special is how it still holds up, even in the context of that kind of competition, even after so long. **RP**

If you want to know more about *ADOM*'s history, check out the 2016 presentation Thomas Biskup gave at the Roguelike Celebration event.



Barnabas, the orcish shopkeep... grunts:

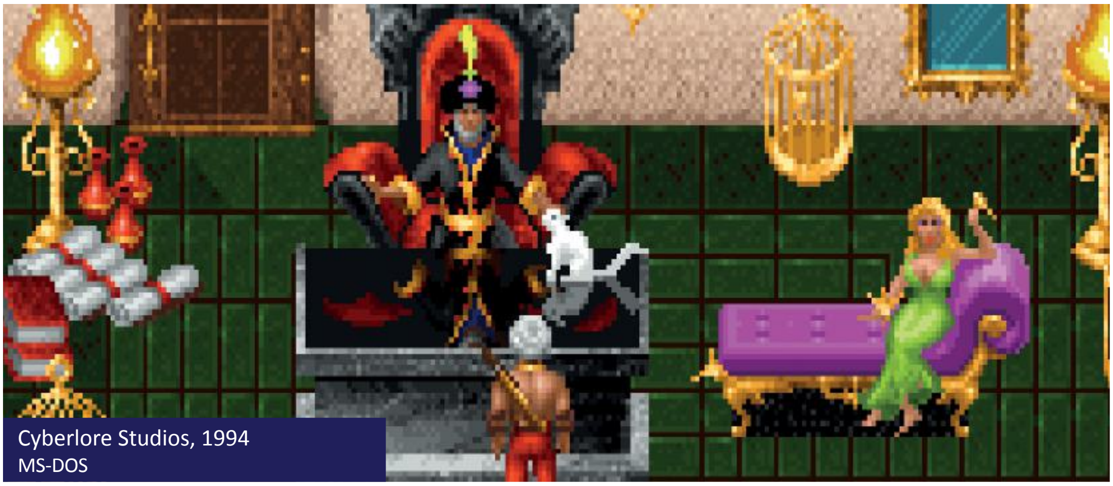
"Look around but don't forget to pay!"

A section of floor.
shopkeeper
• Barnabas
• Moderately exp.
for more options

You talk to Barnabas, the orcish shopkeeper.
Barnabas, the orcish shopkeeper, grunts: "Look around but don't forget to pay!"

ADOM Deluxe, sold on Steam since 2015, comes with graphical tiles, mouse support, achievements, more gameplay customisation options, special challenges and other nice updates

Al-Qadim:
The Genie's Curse


Cyberlore Studios, 1994
MS-DOS

Cyberlore Studios was founded in 1992 by ex-SSI developers. Later they partnered with their former employer to make *Al-Qadim* and *Entomorph*.

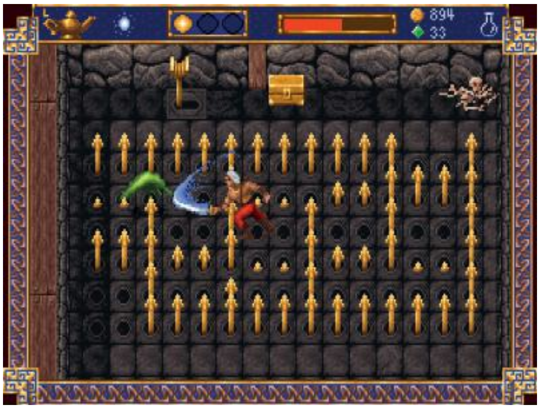
Al-Qadim is not your typical RPG. Usually, CRPGs are about experience points, stats, numbers, skills, a plethora of weapons and huge amounts of choice. And although *Genie's Curse* is based on the obscure *AD&D* setting *Al-Qadim*, the game is nothing like that. You play a predefined character and you won't ever need to check your stats. Yet this game is, for me, one of the best role-playing experiences I have ever tasted. Why, you might ask?

Al-Qadim puts you in the curly shoes of a corsair finishing his training. Note that you are not a corsair in the ordinary meaning – on the contrary, you are a law-upholding hero, part of a respected family, who adheres to a strict code of honour and is always helpful to anyone in distress. That's what I liked about the game: it moves away from statistics and numbers to what I find really important: character and storytelling. It's true, you don't have much choice in how to play the game, and the story tries to keep you very strictly on the rails, but in exchange it gives you the opportunity to really create a connection with your character.

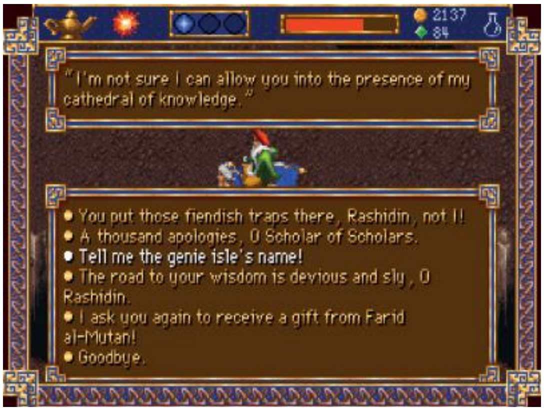
As you return home, you are joyously welcomed by your family. That time is, however, cut short, due to a tragic event – your family's genie has attacked the ship of the Caliph. With your parents now in prison, it's your task is to find out who is responsible for this. For that you'll battle foes via highly-simplified real-time combat and overcome many puzzles, usually based on switches and maze navigation. When you are not fighting or getting lost, you'll be testing your wits during conversations with NPCs.

The *Al-Qadim* setting is heavily influenced by the Arabian Nights, so during your travels you'll seek advice from a sorceress, solve riddles from djinns, sail the seas on a magical ship, ride on flying carpets and have other fantastical adventures. The game has beautifully drawn graphics, with vivid details that give it a fairy-tale feeling. This atmosphere is further enhanced by its rich Arab-inspired MIDI music.

Al-Qadim is worth trying for various reasons. If you love good storytelling and you would like to relive your childhood, when the fairy tales were full of true heroes with pure hearts, then it is definitely a game for you. Just don't come in expecting the complex, stat-heavy RPG experience of other SSI titles. **BM**



Al-Qadim's combat and puzzles are simple, but well-executed, similar to those on the 2D *Legend of Zelda* games

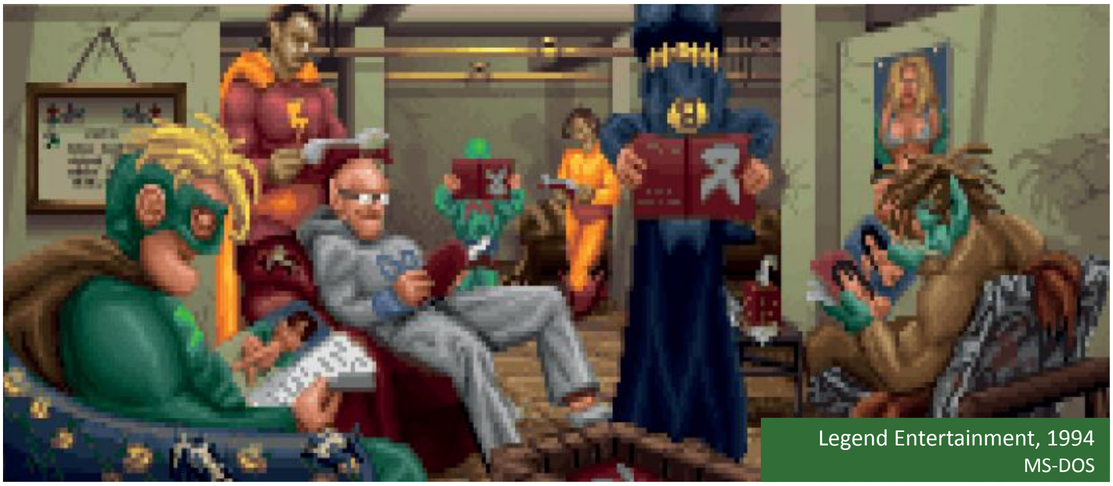


"I'm not sure I can allow you into the presence of my cathedral of knowledge."

- You put those fiendish traps there, Rashidin, not I!
- A thousand apologies, O Scholar of Scholars.
- Tell me the genie isle's name!
- The road to your wisdom is devious and sly, O Rashidin.
- I ask you again to receive a gift from Farid al-Mutan!
- Goodbye.

The dialogues are interesting and well-written, but, despite the many choices, few of them have actual consequences

Superhero League of Hoboken



Legend Entertainment, 1994
MS-DOS

After releasing *Zork* in 1980, Infocom ruled the text adventure genre during the '80s. When the company was purchased by Activision in 1989, a few employees decided to jump ship and set up their own company, called Legend Entertainment.

Their first games, such as the *Spellcasting* series, were roughly text adventures with static images and a friendly interface. However, in 1994, armed with a new engine, Legend tried something truly unique.

Created by veteran Steve Meretzky, *Superhero League of Hoboken* is a humorous adventure/RPG hybrid about a team of ridiculous superheroes who live in post-apocalyptic New Jersey.

As the Crimson Tape, a hero whose only power is to create organisational charts, your task is to gather a team of similarly underpowered heroes and wisely use them to complete various missions.

These missions are solved in the usual old-school adventure-game fashion: you collect countless weird items, using them and your "unique" powers to create rather unusual solutions – like playing Frank Sinatra songs to kill an army of evil pigeons.

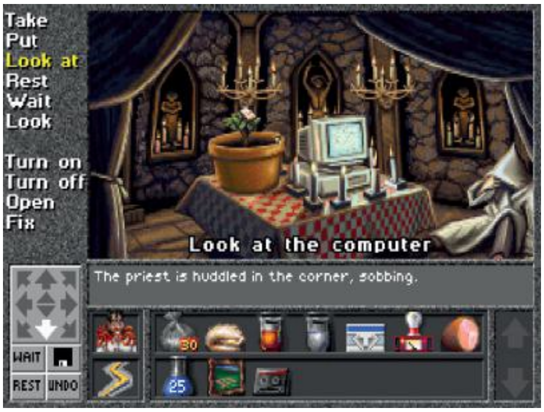
The game, however, is explored via an RPG-like world map, where you can freely travel from your HQ to various locations, such as villages, stores, museums and decayed landmarks. More areas open as you learn to cross rougher terrain and acquire subway passes.

You'll also face random battles against bizarre creatures, like psionic evangelists, mutant bureaucrats and even a robotic version of Richard Nixon. Combat is turn-based and very simple, even though it allows for nine party members. Most heroes will just melee or shoot, but a few weird powers like Tropical Oil Man's "increase foe's cholesterol" can be quite useful.

The downside of this unusual mix of genres is that you'll spend a lot of time walking across the huge map and battling monsters while trying to figure out the puzzles. Often the item you need for a mission is in a dangerous and undiscovered area far away, or even only available as a rare drop from battles.

What holds everything together and keeps the game enjoyable is the brilliant writing. From missions about buying guacamole to lawyers suing your party mid-battle, *Superhero League of Hoboken* manages to be as funny as it's flawed. **FE**

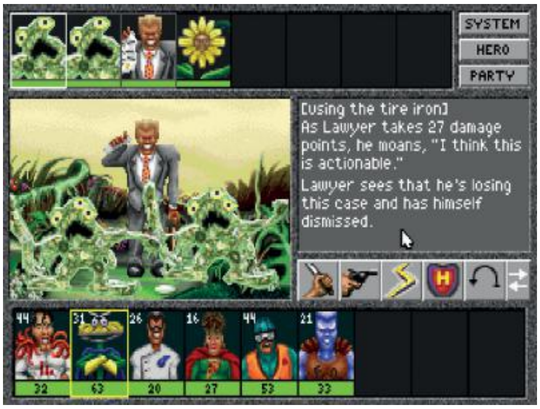
Legend would still produce a few more games, such as the cult classic *Deathgate*. before its closure in 2004.



Look at the computer

The priest is huddled in the corner, sobbing.

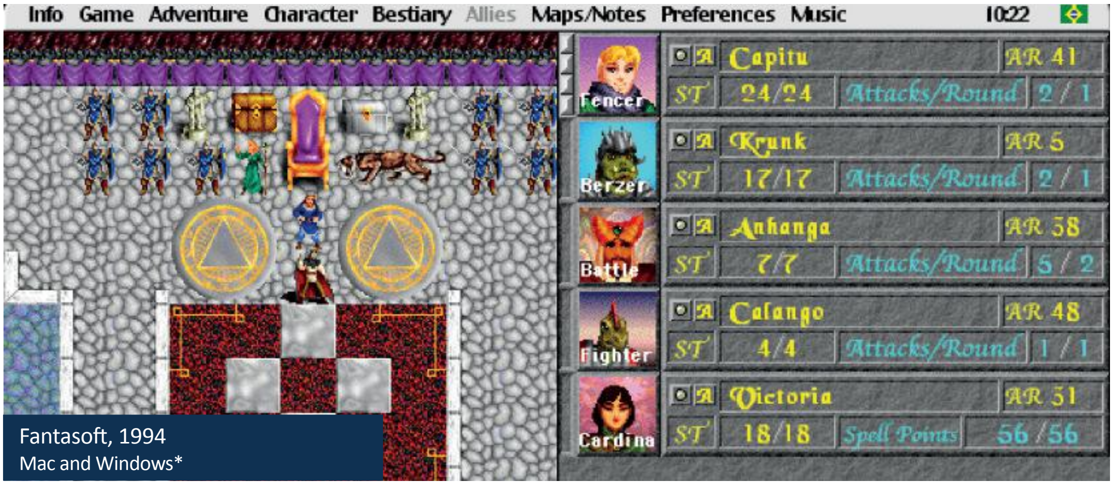
Some items are used for puzzles, others to reach new areas, and a few will even increase your stats or give characters new superpowers



[using the tire iron]
As Lawyer takes 27 damage points, he moans, "I think this is actionable."
Lawyer sees that he's losing this case and has himself dismissed.

The RPG side is very accessible, with a simple turn-based combat system, few stats and heroes who automatically wear their best equipment

Realmz


Info Game Adventure Character Bestiary Allies Maps/Notes Preferences Music
10:22
Fencer
Capitu
AR 41
ST
24/24
Attacks/Round
2 / 1
Berzer
Krunk
AR 5
ST
17/17
Attacks/Round
2 / 1
Battle
Anhanga
AR 38
ST
7/7
Attacks/Round
5 / 2
Fighter
Calango
AR 48
ST
4/4
Attacks/Round
1 / 1
Cardina
Victoria
AR 51
ST
18/18
Spell Points
56 /56

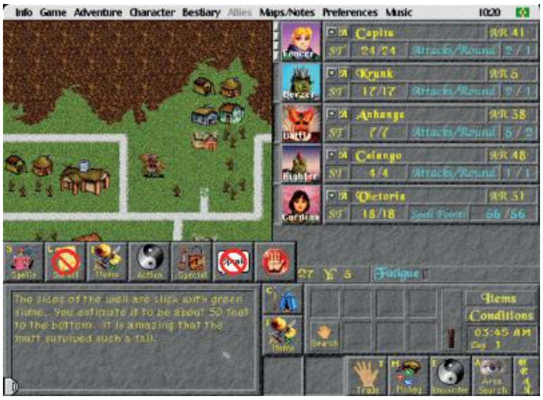
Fantasoft, 1994
Mac and Windows*

***The Windows version of *Realmz* is outdated and doesn't have the *Divinity* toolset. It's advised to play the Mac version, using emulation software such as *Basilisk II* or *SheepShaver*.**

Countless adventures across countless realms – this might as well have been the slogan of *Realmz*. Developed primarily for Macintosh, *Realmz* is a game that proudly wore its genesis in the '90s on its sleeves – bright colours, an incredible assortment of character creation options, plus a shareware philosophy and business model that led to incredible staying power, even as time wore on.

On first running *Realmz*, the player is presented with a single "scenario" that they can play to their heart's content: the City of Bywater, a simple and relatively bare-bones adventure that could be completed in the haze of a summer afternoon. Not counting the areas sealed off until you paid for and registered your copy, that is.

Despite its simple and relatively spartan roots, Bywater is still a fun and surprisingly versatile little adventure. And behind it lies *Realmz's* incredibly complex character creation system. The plethora of options and statistics is astounding, allowing you to create truly complex parties of up to six characters, with exotic heroes such as Leprechaun Cabalists, Kobold Crusaders and Vampire Dabblers.


Info Game Adventure Character Bestiary Allies Maps/Notes Preferences Music
10:20
Capitu
Krunk
Anhanga
Calango
Victoria
Spells
Items
Action
Special
Fatigue
Items
Conditions
03:45 AM
Day 1
Search
Trade
Money
Encounter
Area Search

The sides of the well are slick with green slime. You estimate it to be about 50 feet to the bottom. It is amazing that the mutt survived such a fall.

Realmz was quite ahead of its time, allowing events to be solved in multiple ways: dialogue choices, skill checks, special items, spells, etc.

Each of the 19 races and 20 classes – or castes, as they are known in *Realmz* – also possesses other advantages or disadvantages, such as fire resistance in demons or lizardmen who regenerate. Stats range from movement and attacks per round to racial resistances, hated enemies and even complex ageing.

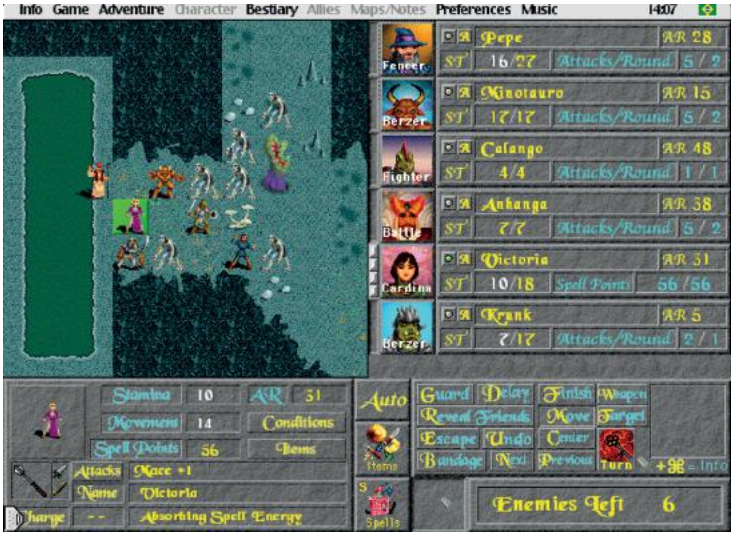
Fine-tuning your party leads to one of *Realmz*'s many surprising strengths – multiple approaches to certain events. Wandering around Bywater, for example, might lead you to a young boy whose dog has fallen down the well. To help him you can use a rope, have an acrobatic party member flip down into the well, call the town guard, try to use a spell, etc.

This flexibility also lends itself well to combat. Turn-based and highly tactical, combat is reminiscent of that in SSI's Gold Box RPGs, updated to include a mouse-driven interface and improvements such as terrain types, obstacles, guarding against approach and much more. Every battle feels unique, as large enemies jump over obstacles, giant bees paralyse the party, necromancers summon undead hordes, squishy rogues chuck flasks of oil to save their lives, etc.

Realmz is a potpourri of old-school pen-and-paper ideas, and nowhere is that more true than in the magic. There are three different schools, each with its own utility, combat and scenario-based spells. The Waterworld spell, for example, makes your party able to breath underwater, opening new horizons for you to explore – or allowing you to survive a flash flood in a murky cavern. Casting is mana-based, and you can "overcast" a spell, increasing its mana cost, but also its damage and area of effect.

The scenario is a fantasy melange that does whatever it pleases, and is all the more charming for it. Barring some twists and turns, Bywater is a shallow and linear story, but can be surprisingly effective.

> "Most of the *Realmz* scenarios have been aimed towards hack-and-slash, as that area is really lacking in RPGs. Sure, there are games out there that give you hack-and-slash, but they don't go into enough detail with character development. I got so sick of games that had your character broken down into 3 coloured lines: Health, Attack and Defence. I wanted a game that let me get into the nuts and bolts of a character's stats. That is where I think *Realmz* is top-of-the-line."
>
> *– Tim Phillips, Realmz's creator*


Info Game Adventure Character Bestiary Allies Maps/Notes Preferences Music
Pepe
Minotauro
Calango
Anhanga
Victoria
Krank
Stamina
Movement
Spell Points
Conditions
Items
Attacks
Mace +1
Name
Victoria
Absorbing Spell Energy
Auto
Guard
Delay
Finish
Weapon
Reveal Friends
Move
Target
Escape
Undo
Center
Bandage
Next
Previous
Turn
Enemies Left 6

Combat is the main strength of *Realmz*: it's tactical and full of options, and with a mouse-driven UI, it feels like an updated Gold Box game

Regardless, the solid and multifaceted character-building combined with the flexible encounters and events successfully convinced players to register their games, which not only unlocked all of Bywater, but gave access to the *Prelude to Pestilence* scenario, a higher-level scenario, while also offering the ability to create high-level characters. Which you'd end up needing if you didn't spend your time wisely in Bywater (or spent too much time, and become a little too strong). Combat can become very complex very quickly, especially when magical enemies, buffs and debuffs come into play.

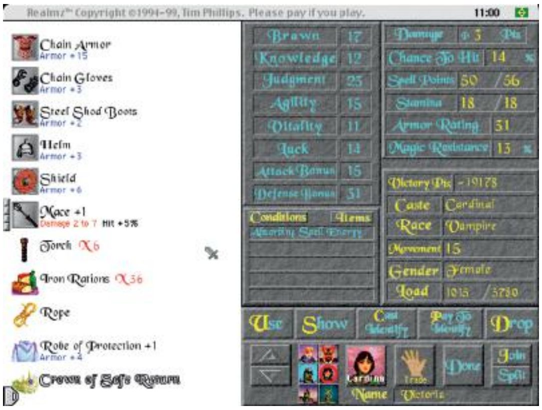
But make no mistake – the meat of the game was the stories you built around your characters and party; as well as recruitable allies such as the friendly wizard Vodalian, or Reppep Rd, a drunk dwarf found in the local brothel. Being able to imagine your party and their stories, however, is probably what lead so many fans to want to create more, and developer Tim Phillips allowed them to do just that.

The *Realmz Divinity Toolset* is fairly primitive by today's standards for mod tools, but at the time it allowed fans of the game to create their own scenarios to do with as they pleased. You could even license them in the hopes that someone would pay you for your time, share them with friends or spread it freely, on the wild and untamed Internet of the early '90s.

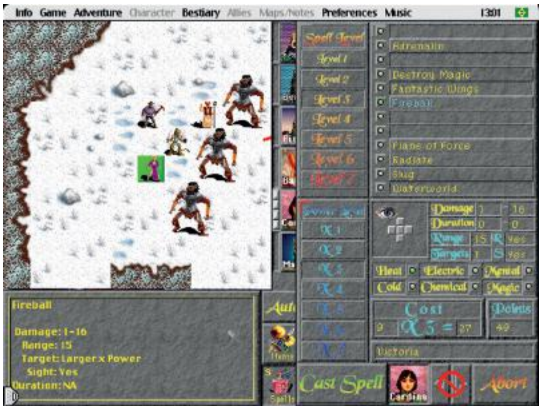
And many did. Though it never flourished in the way gaming communities have now, with easier access to the Internet and fewer barriers to entry, the fact that a humble shareware game survived from 1994 to the early 2000s is a testament to the stories the fans created.

For all the faults *Realmz* has – a hefty interface and manual that want players to respect them, a somewhat cumbersome weapon-swapping mechanic that becomes remarkably intuitive the longer you play, a blistering maze of hotkeys, and no real end-state – those are also its strengths, and it deserves to be remembered for them. There are still realms out there waiting to be explored, after all. **TW**

In 2001 Fantasoft released *New Centurions*, a sci-fi RPG based on *Realmz's* engine. It was only released for Mac, and is no longer available for download.

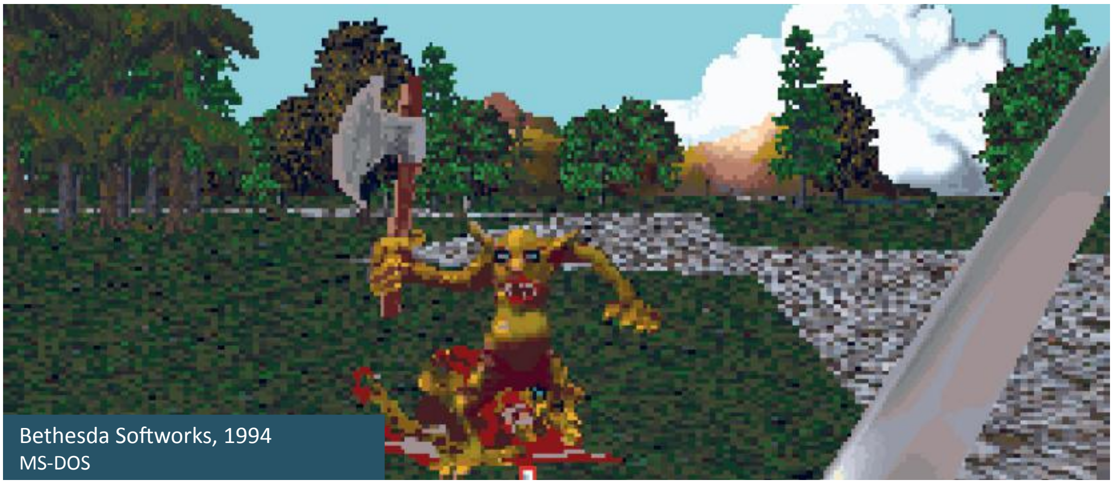

Chain Armor
Chain Gloves
Steel Shod Boots
Helm
Shield
Mace +1
Torch
Iron Rations
Rope
Robe of Protection +1
Brawn
Knowledge
Judgment
Agility
Vitality
Luck
Attack Bonus
Defense Bonus
Damage
Chance To Hit
Spell Points
Stamina
Armor Rating
Magic Resistance
Victory Pts
Caste
Cardinal
Race
Vampire
Movement
Gender
Female
Load
Conditions
Items
Use
Show
Drop
Done
Join
Split
Name
Victoria

The interface is rather clunky, but it offers very detailed information on all the game's stats, rules and items


Info Game Adventure Character Bestiary Allies Maps/Notes Preferences Music
Spell Level
Fireball
Damage: 1-16
Range: 15
Target: Larger x Power
Sight: Yes
Duration: NA
Damage
Duration
Range
Targets
Heat
Cold
Electric
Chemical
Mental
Magic
Cost
Points
Cast Spell
Abort

The magic system allows players to boost the strength and area of a spell by spending more magic points

The Elder Scrolls: Arena



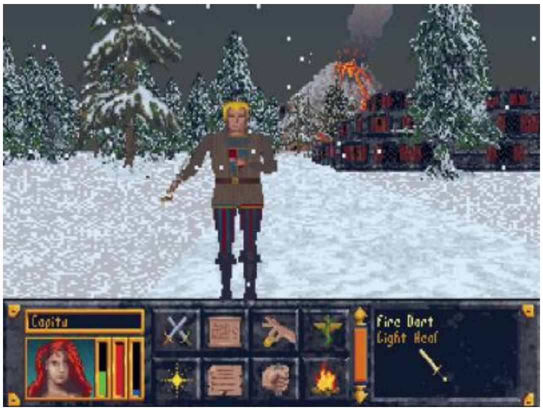
Bethesda Softworks, 1994
MS-DOS

***Arena* can be somewhat tricky to run properly under DOSBox, so we recommend the handy ArenaSetup package, that comes pre-configured.**

The Elder Scrolls: Arena is the first game in Bethesda's long-running *Elder Scrolls* series. It came out in 1994, roughly two years after *Ultima Underworld* opened everyone's eyes to the concept of a first-person, free-roaming RPG.

But Bethesda had its own ideas. In 1990, it sharpened its open-world teeth with *The Terminator* licence, casting players as either Kyle Reese or the Terminator and setting them loose in an open-world slice of Los Angeles. It was crude, but it paved the way for *Arena*. Instead of one dungeon or city, Bethesda set out to create an entire continent filled with both.

Lead designer Vijay Lakshman and his team went all out to create their own world and lore, inspired by old pen-and-paper RPGs. The continent of Tamriel (*Arena* is the only game in the series to feature the entire continent) measures "three to four thousand kilometres east to west", and contains a variety of races, environments, flora and fauna. It also includes a day-night cycle and even its own calendar, with holidays and special dates unique to each region; all that inside a stack of eight 3.5" floppies.



Seasons alter the weather; clothing and races change with each region; landmarks, such as Morrowind's Red Mountain, can even be seen on the horizon

Tile-based CRPGs have been doing that for years with smaller, 2D worlds, but taking those concepts into the interactive intimacy of a free-roaming 3D experience raised the CRPG bar as much as *Ultima Underworld* did.

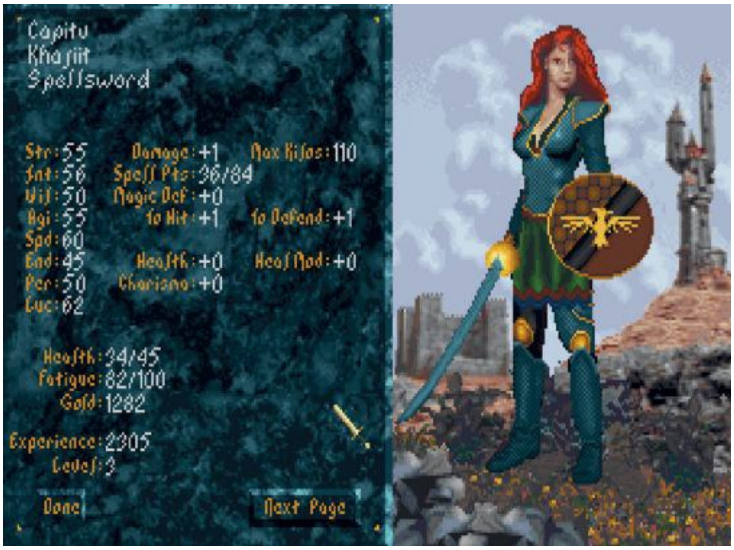
Fiction fills the opening pages of the manual, offering a starting point that *Elder Scrolls* fans will immediately recognise – a captured prisoner. In *Arena*, you languish in a dungeon beneath the Imperial City, where careless exploration could easily kill you even before you begin your epic quest to find the pieces of the Staff of Chaos and end the rule of the usurper hiding in the Emperor's skin, Jagar Tharn.

Eighteen classes await in *Arena*, along with *D&D*-like stats to shape a character from one of the eight races in the game. Or, borrowing a page from Origin's *Ultima IV*, a series of questions suggest which class will be best for the player. I remember spending an hour or so carefully mixing different classes and races together, testing them in the opening dungeon against sewer vermin, and then starting over again to try another class and mix of statistics.

Despite the *Ultima IV* inspirations, there's no alignment or strict moral fibre tying players' hands. You're free to bash down doors in the middle of the night to break into stores, steal everything and kill the guards on the way out with the loot if you want, while searching for a way to end Jagar Tharn's rule.

Combat appears to be simple button-mashing, but hides some unexpected depth. Melee attacks are performed by holding the right mouse button and moving the mouse across the screen. Each movement executes a different type of attack: moving sideways leads to a slash, while a vertical movement results in a thrusting attack. Attacking at the same time as your enemy will parry the attack.

> "Up to that time, Bethesda had never done a role-playing game, only action games like the *Terminator* series and sports titles like *Wayne Gretzky Hockey*. I remember talking to the guys at Sir-Tech who were doing *Wizardry VII: Crusaders of the Dark Savant* at the time, and them literally laughing at us for thinking we could do it."
>
> *– Ted Peterson,* Arena*'s designer*


Capitu
Khajiit
Spellsword

Str:55
Int:56
Wil:50
Agi:55
Spd:60
End:45
Per:50
Luc:62

Damage:+1
Spell Pts:36/84
Magic Def:+0
To Hit:+1
Health:+0
Charisma:+0

Max Kilos:110
To Defend:+1
Heal Mod:+0

Health:34/45
Fatigue:82/100
Gold:1282
Experience:2305
Level:3

In *Arena,* the Khajiit descend from an intelligent feline race, but have human appearance due to memory limitations

To help vanquish your foes, *Arena* features about 21 weapon types and 26 armour pieces, all of which can be made from one of eight different kinds of material – such as Iron, Mithril or Ebony – each with a different bonus. Furthermore, enchanted items might be found in dungeons or bought in stores. And, if you're lucky, you might even hear rumours pointing you towards one of the legendary artefacts of Tamriel.

Also, if the 50 spells available are too boring, you could always try to create your own from a huge number of factors and effects (which can sometimes lead to making Mages wildly overpowered).

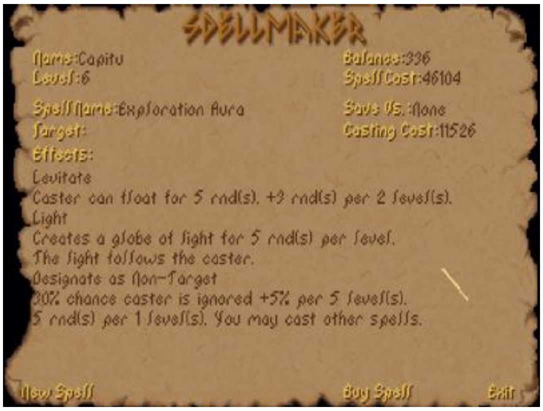
As you keep playing, the randomly generated quests make it easy to ignore the main campaign. The way that the game randomises the end-goals for side-quests, dungeon locations, and the rumours one can hear from one town to the next feed into that sandbox illusion, with more and more hours spent wandering through each province just to see what was there.

As compelling as the smoke and mirrors are, technology could only go so far. The massive continent is mostly empty, filled with procedurally-generated plains. Despite being visible on the map, there is no Red Mountain (indeed, hardly any mountains) and doing too many side-quests can make some of those dungeons in the wilderness seem a little too familiar after so long, with a bit of repetition thrown in.

Regardless, the sheer geographic vastness and the idea of infinite adventure successfully made the world of Tamriel a sandbox of possibilities for which other CRPGs had only paved the way.

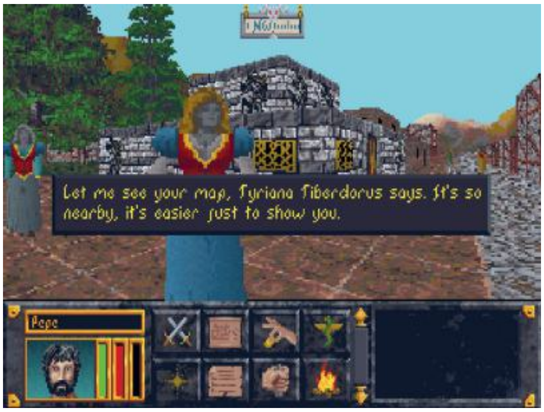
With a 3D viewscreen, action-oriented combat, and its blend all of that in with attributes, player-driven morality, and a world filled with a wide variety of equipment and empowering loot, *Arena* lived up to its name as a crucible in which players could find their own way, becoming the first stepping stone in Bethesda's biggest series. **RE**

Since 2004, Bethesda has made *Arena* freely available for download, as part of the 10th anniversary of *The Elder Scrolls* series.



Name:Capitu
Level:6
Balance:336
Spell Cost:46104
Spell Name:Exploration Aura
Target:
Save VS.:None
Casting Cost:11526
Effects:
Levitate
Caster can float for 5 rnd(s). +3 rnd(s) per 2 level(s).
Light
Creates a globe of light for 5 rnd(s) per level.
The light follows the caster.
Designate as Non-Target
30% chance caster is ignored +5% per 5 level(s).
5 rnd(s) per 1 level(s). You may cast other spells.

At Mage Guilds you can pay to create your own spells, combining up to three effects in any way you want


Let me see your map, Tyriana Tiberdorus says. It's so nearby, it's easier just to show you.

It's vital to talk to NPCs and ask them directions; they also provide side-quests and useful rumours

1995-1999: New 3D worlds and new audiences

The second half of the '90s continued with the impressive release of new games that spawned iconic series or even entire new genres, but now 3D graphics were the new hot thing.

Powered by the new generation of consoles, *Super Mario 64, Final Fantasy VII, Metal Gear Solid, Resident Evil, Medal of Honor, Tomb Raider* and *Gran Turismo* sold millions and set the standards for 3D games.

On the PC side, RTS and FPS titles continued to rise in popularity, with blockbusters like *Command & Conquer, Age of Empires, WarCraft II, StarCraft, Quake, Unreal* and *Half-Life* – partly due to an increasingly popular feature: online matches. With the audience for games expanding, titles like *Full Throttle, Diablo, Phantasmagoria* and *Baldur's Gate* also sold over a million copies each, an amazing feat at the time.

However, developing games was quickly becoming more and more expensive. Mistakes had heavier costs, and companies like Interplay started to sink under failed attempts to get into the 3D craze and/or the booming console market. Decade-long series suddenly ended after disappointing jumps to 3D, such as *King's Quest VIII: Mask of Eternity, Ultima IX: Ascension* and *Quest for Glory V: Dragon Fire*.

The arrival of Windows 95 erased any remaining doubt that PCs were now synonymous with Windows, but the "Wintel" combo was weakened as Intel's Pentium chips saw increased competition from AMD. Rivalry was also grew increasingly fierce among 3D acceleration cards, sound cards, peripherals like joysticks and even Internet browsers.

With 3D games being so popular, companies like 3dfx, Nvidia, S3 and ATI fought for dominance with their "3D accelerator" graphics cards – a battle mostly dominated by 3dfx's popular *Voodoo* cards.

By the mid-'90s, the Internet had become the new frontier for business. Every company wanted a website (often not knowing why), eBay and Amazon were founded, the first banner ad campaigns appeared and there was a lot of market speculation – the dot.com bubble had begun.

Two browsers fought for dominance then: *Internet Explorer* and *Netscape Navigator.* But Microsoft freely offering its browser to any Windows 95 owner led to a quick victory, with most browsers becoming traditionally free. A subsequent trial in 1998 condemned Microsoft for the tactics it had used to secure its monopoly, but it was already too late.

Meanwhile, Apple was lost. Their new console, Pippin, was a failure, while the Macintosh was a relic. The solution was to bring back Steve Jobs, fired in 1985. With the release of the iMac in 1998, he managed to revive Apple, establishing it as the "cool" and out-of-the-box alternative to PCs.

Between Windows 95's accessibility, popular new games and the lure of the Internet, the late '90s is when computers finally went mainstream.

Trends:

Online and LAN Multiplayer: *Doom* allowed up to four players in deathmatch battles. With access to Internet still limited, the more popular solution was *Doom* LAN parties. When games like *Quake* and *StarCraft* arrived, the Internet was much more widespread, and playing online became extremely popular. However, it wasn't simple – the IP addresses of players and servers had to be found and typed in. To help, services like GameSpy and Blizzard's Battle.net started to appear, listing servers and handling matchmaking.

GameSpy was originally called QuakeSpy, created in 1996 to help people play *Quake* online

3D Graphics: The '90s was a decade of learning how to handle 3D games. Even explaining them was difficult early on – *Ultima Underworld* (1992) had to run magazine ads showing an object from multiple angles to illustrate the concept. Then came problems like controlling characters (and cameras) in 3D space, competing rendering technologies, primitive tools, high system requirements, etc. It was a very long process, but one that led to important breakthroughs, such as the popularisation of the analogue stick.

Super Mario 64 was an early poster boy for 3D games, showing just how well the concept could work

MUDs and MMOs: MUDs and online RPGs had existed since the late '70s, but the mid-'90s saw them explode in popularity and reach all corners of the globe, thanks to the Internet. There were thousands of MUDs to play online, from epic RPG adventures to PVP-only games to adult role-play servers. In the US, titles like *Ultima Online* (1997) and *EverQuest* (1999) would set the standards for western MMORPGs, paving the way for *World of Warcraft* (2004), while *Lineage* (1998) would reach millions of players in Korea.

Lineage would reach over 3 million monthly players, making it the biggest pre-*World of Warcraft* online game

Windows 95 arrives. A landmark, it helped make computers more user-friendly and became synonymous with PCs.

The **Nintendo 64** is released, still using cartridges but introducing the analogue stick. It would sell 32 million units worldwide.

DVDs start to be commercially available in the US, offering much larger storage capacity and faster transfer rates than CDs.

The **iMac** is released. Created by Steve Jobs in his return to Apple as CEO, it marked the rebirth of the company's popularity.

The **Dreamcast** is released. Facing the PS2's overwhelming popularity and SEGA's own internal struggles, it was quickly abandoned, selling 9M units.

1995

1996

1997

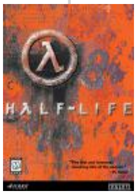
1998

1999

Pokémon is released in Japan for the Game Boy, selling 10M copies. It would arrive in the West in 1998, starting a "Pokémania" that took over the planet, with games, anime, toys, cards, etc.

Quake would follow up on *Doom* with fully 3D graphics and physics. A landmark that popularised deathmatches, WASD controls and mods like *Team Fortress*, leading to Machinima and speedruns.

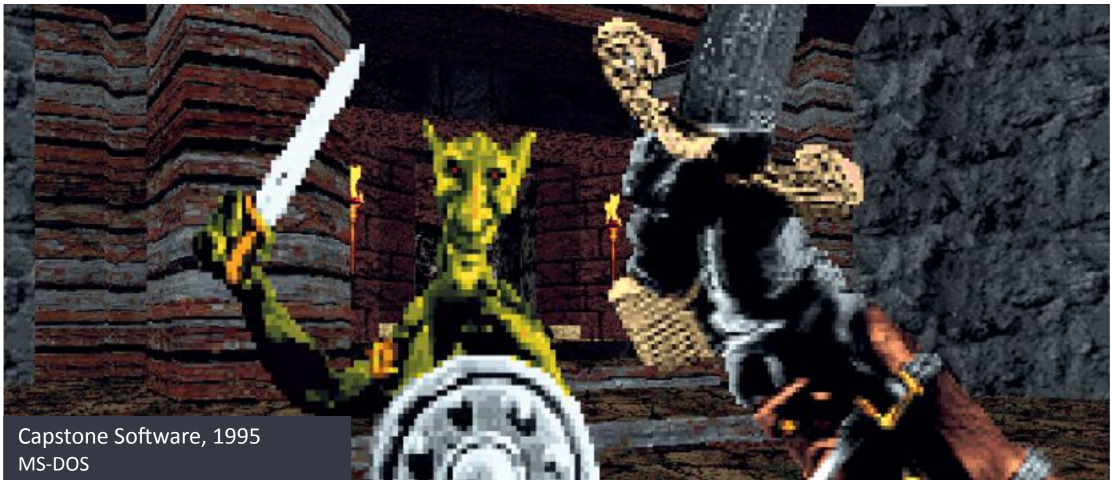
StarCraft is released. The most popular RTS of all time, it offers three races, great story and excellent multiplayer. It became an early eSport icon and sold over 11M copies.



Half-Life pushes the FPS genre from killing arenas to an immersive interactive world, built on seamless storytelling. It also received countless mods, including the still-popular *Counter-Strike*.

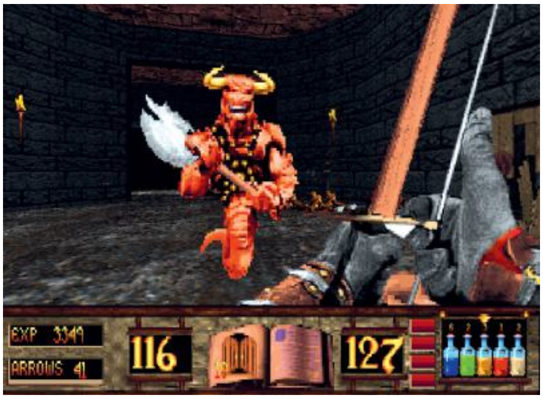
Bleem! is released. A commercial PS1 emulator for PCs, it was brutally sued by Sony. Despite winning in court, the legal fees put it out of business and emulation became an industry taboo.

Witchaven

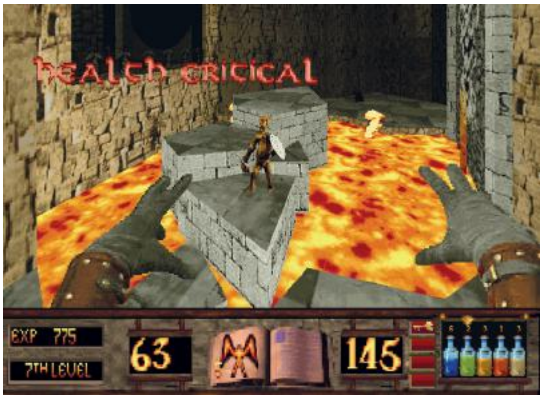

Capstone Software, 1995
MS-DOS

***Witchaven* was made using the BUILD Engine, which would later be used by *Duke Nukem 3D, Shadow Warrior* and *Blood*.**

Witchaven is not a fully-fledged RPG – it's a first-person shooter (or rather, hack-and-slasher) with RPG elements. There are quite a few of those elements: XP, levelling up, degrading weapons, different types of armour, spells, traps, secrets and other goodies. There are five different types of potion to collect, various combat and utility spells to learn. But there's no character creation, no NPC interaction and not a single choice to be made – besides gore and difficulty levels.



The game makes great use of physics, with neat tricks such as firing arrows into a wall and climbing on top of them



Utility spells like Fly and Night Vision, as well as potions of Invisibility and Fire Resistance, are important tools for your survival

You play as knight Grondoval, a one-man army sent to defeat the evil witch Illwhyrin. Killing trolls, imps and other enemies will make you level up and become tougher still. Higher levels also mean less weapon corrosion and access to more potent spells – and you will need those to be able to defeat Illwhyrin.

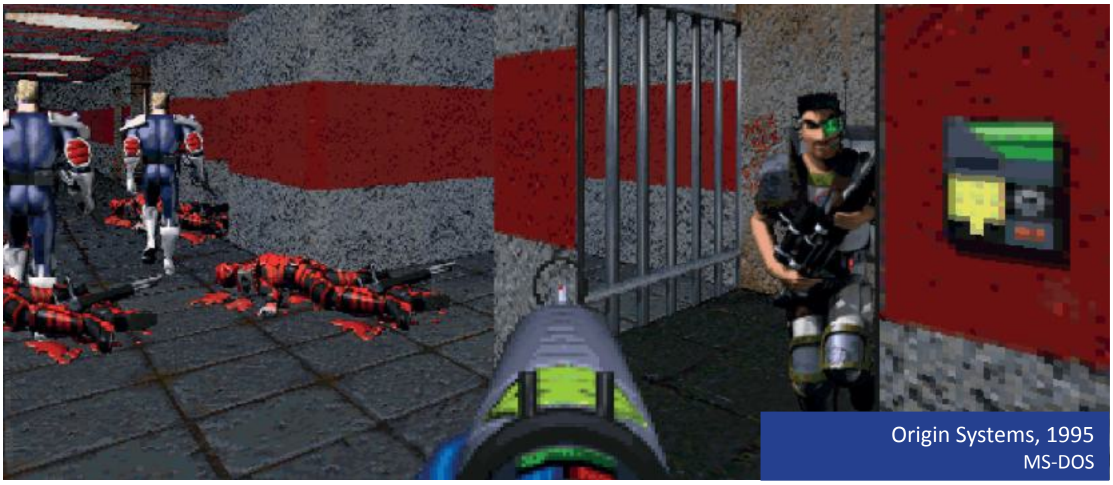
Talking about defeat: the need to think tactically or die is exactly what makes *Witchaven* so compelling. In the beginning, combat is mostly a close-quarters affair, but you will soon find out that the combination of degrading weapons and imprecise controls makes it an especially dangerous one. Thankfully, most of the minions are just as susceptible to terrain-induced damage as you are, so using the environment to your advantage will end many fights early.

In later levels and at higher difficulty, you'll find fewer potions, scrolls and even weapons, and chances are that you will run out of essential supplies at the most unfortunate moment. Discovering that you have no spell scroll left when the trap-bearing corridor you reached by flying turns out to be a dead end (and you haven't saved in a long while!) would be an example. But if you were a little thrifty, you might still be able to cross the corridor with the help of your bow and arrows – provided you saved those up.

There are a few shortcomings (mainly squishy controls and visually poor interior design), but the game scores with its clever use of physics and gripping combat. Defeating foes with environmental help is even more rewarding than using the 'Nuke' spell.

Witchaven stands today as a product of its time, when games like *Doom* and *Hexen* were kings and everyone wanted a piece of the pie. Too bad that its 1996 sequel expanded primarily on the shortcomings: *Witchaven II: Blood Vengeance* suffered from horrible controls that rendered it nearly unplayable. **NS**

CyberMage:
Darklight Awakening



Origin Systems, 1995
MS-DOS

In the not-so-far future, governments have made way for mega-corporations, but their pursuit of profits at any cost isn't to everyone's liking. As a consequence, armed rebels have taken the fight to the streets. This is the Cyberpunk era you live in, and this is where you manage to get yourself killed.

Then you suddenly get better. You awake in a lab – without memories, but with a gem implanted into your forehead, and with the minions of NeCrom hot on your trail. If you want to find out why this guy is after you and why you suddenly have access to a mystical power called "Darklight", you'd better run – NOW!

Thus starts *CyberMage: Darklight Awakening*, by David W. Bradley of *Wizardry* fame. At first glance, *CyberMage* may be just a futuristic first-person shooter, but it's driven by a compelling story and incorporates several RPG elements. There are traps, secrets and puzzles; exploration is an important (and quite rewarding) part of the game; the atmosphere is immersive. You can (and will have to) talk to NPCs to gather information – friendlies and hostiles alike. Not everybody should be killed just because the game looks like a shooter! Gambling and spending the money in different stores are options, just as are watching TV or driving tanks. And then there are your "magical" skills.

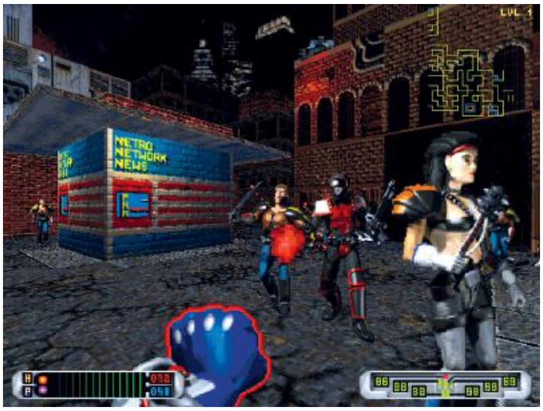
CyberMage's way of imparting new spells to the player's character is also intriguing. You'll also learn a new Darklight power by being exposed to its effects! This makes for interesting situations: running from an enemy with a strong power might be an option if your health is low, but, if it's not, charging him to get hit and retain his gift would be the better alternative.

There's also a more traditional arsenal for non-magical combat. Each weapon works differently against each type of enemy, while your body armour is split into separate parts which can be repaired or replaced.

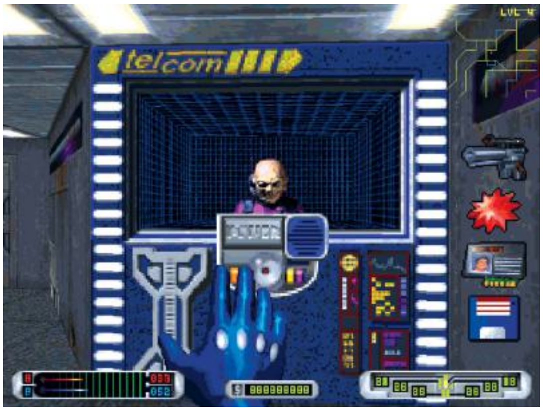
But the most important piece of equipment is your jetpack. Once you acquire this, you will be immune to a score of bugs, as the game will occasionally crash if you happen to tread on the wrong patch of ground.

Add extreme hardware requirements, stupid NPCs and a choppy engine, and you'll know why *CyberMage* never got the cult following it deserves. But behind those shortcomings lies an atmospheric, detailed and beautiful cyberpunk world that begs to be explored. **NS**

***CyberMage's* story is told through comic book-style cutscenes, and the game itself came with a comic book showing the events that led to your death.**

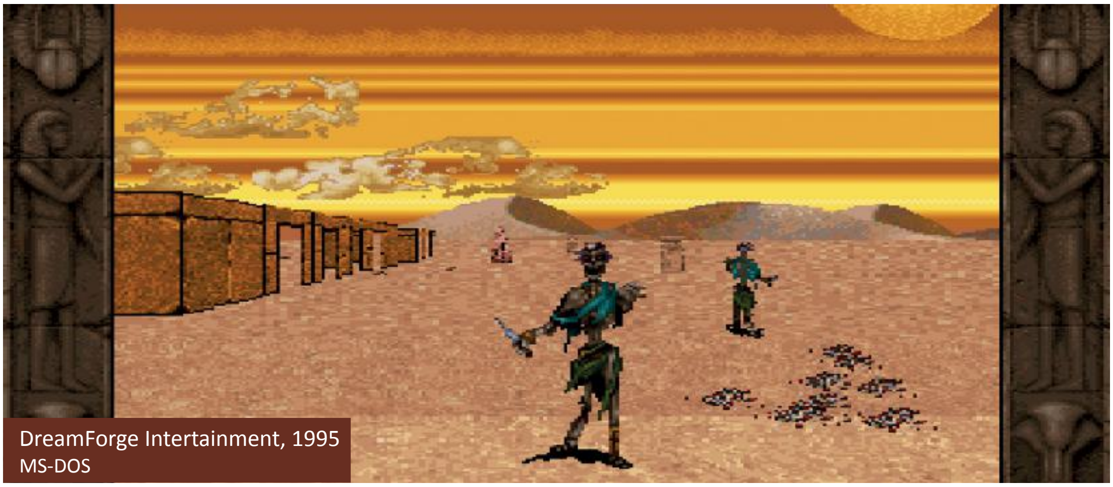


CyberMage was produced by Warren Spector, and some of its elements feel like stepping stones to what he would create in *Deus Ex* five years later



The game is fully voiced, but dialogues are simple and one-sided, with NPCs usually just asking for money or items, or for someone to be killed

Ravenloft:
Stone Prophet

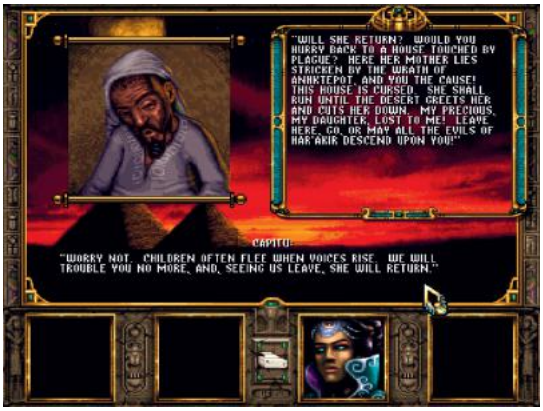

DreamForge Intertainment, 1995
MS-DOS

***Stone Prophet* uses its CD-ROM capabilities in an unusual way, featuring a spirit that sings the "Song of the Elusive Ghost", which tells the story behind the events happening in Har'Akir.**

After traversing a mysterious wall of light, two adventurers are trapped in the desert land of Har'Akir. A wall of searing heat, known as the Wall of Ra, prevents their escape. A flesh-rotting disease and devastating storms threaten the survival of the remaining inhabitants of the desert, most of whom are concentrated in the village of Muhar. Thus begins *Ravenloft: Stone Prophet*.

The game takes the form of a first-person dungeon crawler, using an early 3D engine that feels very much like that of *The Elder Scrolls: Arena*. It includes an automap that is extremely useful to maintain one's orientation, and also supports jumping and flight by means of the appropriate spells, although these game mechanics are much less polished and useful than in a game like *Ultima Underworld*.

The party begins with two characters you create at the start of the game, and can grow to include two additional NPCs for a maximum party size of four. *Stone Prophet* also features day-night cycles, and the blazing sun battering the desert by day requires players to maintain a supply of water in order to survive.


"WILL SHE RETURN? WOULD YOU HURRY BACK TO A HOUSE TOUCHED BY PLAGUE? HERE HER MOTHER LIES STRICKEN BY THE WRATH OF ANHKTEPOT, AND YOU THE CAUSE! THIS HOUSE IS CURSED. SHE SHALL RUN UNTIL THE DESERT GREETS HER AND CUTS HER DOWN. MY PRECIOUS, MY DAUGHTER, LOST TO ME! LEAVE HERE. GO, OR MAY ALL THE EVILS OF HAR'AKIR DESCEND UPON YOU!"

CAPITU:
"WORRY NOT. CHILDREN OFTEN FLEE WHEN VOICES RISE. WE WILL TROUBLE YOU NO MORE, AND, SEEING US LEAVE, SHE WILL RETURN."

The inhabitants of the Har'akir desert are suffering from a terrible curse and blame outsiders such as yourself for their fate; some quite disturbing scenes are presented

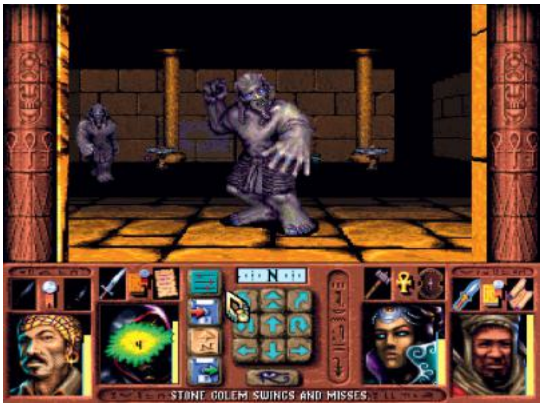
The combat system is real-time, very similar to that of titles such as *Eye of the Beholder* and *Lands of Lore*. The game features a rich bestiary, and being aware of the abilities of each creature is important to be able to overcome them – enemies can be poisoned, given diseases, paralysed, stunned, explode upon death, or cast certain spells. While most creatures can be defeated using normal weapons and spells, some require a special approach. For instance, desert trolls can only be killed by acid, fire or water, and the three greater mummies in the game are so powerful that they cannot be destroyed by normal means.

There are few friends to be found among the frightened and superstitious inhabitants of Muhar, who believe the party to be responsible for the plague and the storms. Nonetheless, many NPCs contribute to the quest with interesting conversation and bits of history that add a lot of atmosphere to the game.

Some of these NPCs are willing to join the party, believing that they stand more of a chance of leaving Har'Akir as part of a group than on their own. These NPCs range from regular humans to exotic creatures such as a wemic, a desert troll, an undead warrior and even a jackalwere.

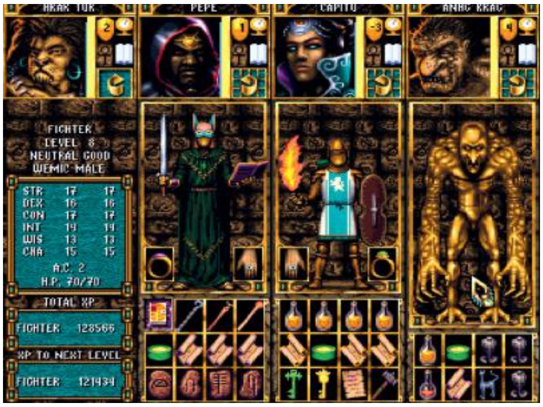
Choosing which NPCs to keep is a strategic decision, as each of them has its strengths and weaknesses. For example, the desert troll is an excellent combatant, especially during the earlier stages of the game; however, he can't gain experience, has a very limited inventory space, and can't hold anything in his hands.

The inventory is very elegant, with a simple drag and drop interface and mannequins that display your current equipment and held items with nicely drawn artwork. The inventory capacity, however, is quite limited, both in slots and in maximum weight.



STONE GOLEM SWINGS AND MISSES.

Whenever you enter one of *Stone Prophet's* dungeons, the interface changes to fit the theme of the level



FIGHTER
LEVEL 8
NEUTRAL GOOD
WEMIC MALE

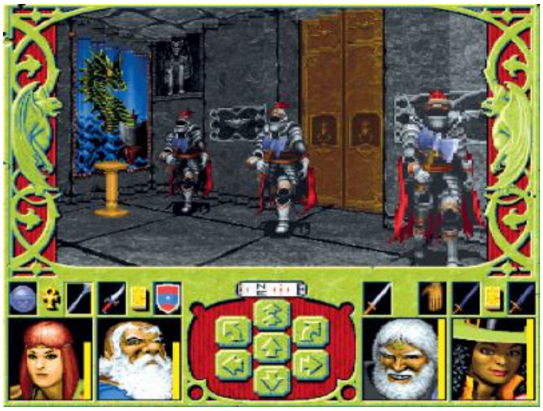
STR 17 17
DEX 16 16
CON 17 17
INT 19 19
WIS 13 13
CHA 15 15

A.C. 2
H.P. 70/70

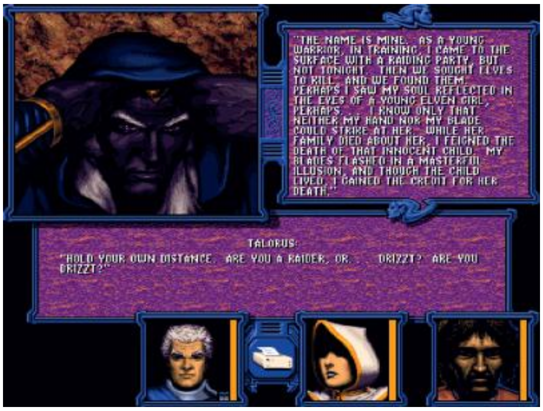
TOTAL XP
FIGHTER 128566

XP TO NEXT LEVEL
FIGHTER 121434

The game's exotic companions all have different abilities; the Wemic, for instance, can jump to reach high places



Ravenloft: Strahd's Possession was the first of the three games and featured a distinctive horror atmosphere



"THE NAME IS MINE. AS A YOUNG WARRIOR, IN TRAINING, I CAME TO THE SURFACE WITH A RAIDING PARTY, BUT NOT TONIGHT. THEN WE SOUGHT ELVES TO KILL, AND WE FOUND THEM. PERHAPS I SAW MY SOUL REFLECTED IN THE EYES OF A YOUNG ELVEN GIRL, PERHAPS. . . . I KNOW ONLY THAT NEITHER MY HAND NOR MY BLADE COULD STRIKE AT HER. WHILE HER FAMILY DIED ABOUT HER, I FEIGNED THE DEATH OF THAT INNOCENT CHILD. MY BLADES FLASHED IN A MASTERFUL ILLUSION, AND THOUGH THE CHILD LIVED, I GAINED THE CREDIT FOR HER DEATH."

TALORUS:
"HOLD YOUR OWN DISTANCE. ARE YOU A RAIDER, OR. . . DRIZZT? ARE YOU DRIZZT?"

Menzoberranzan capitalised heavily on the presence of Drizzt Do'Urden, one of *AD&D*'s most popular characters

These harsh inventory limitations force players to make tough choices, as the world is so full of useful items that one is frequently faced with the dilemma of which items to keep. Especially since characters also need to carry plenty of water skins to survive the blazing desert – or rely on a Create Water spell.

Spellcasting follows the typical *AD&D* magic system, and is quite similar to that in the *Eye of the Beholder* trilogy, featuring typical spells such as Fireball and Magic Missile. Some spells are particularly useful (such as Knock or Teleport), and a few are actually essential to complete the game (such as Speak with Animals, which allows conversation with key NPCs).

Ravenloft: Stone Prophet provides a welcome departure from typical sewer treks with its massive, Egyptian-style open world. The desert of Har'Akir is vast and fraught with dangers, but also provides many interesting encounters, in terms of NPCs, items and dungeons to visit. Each of the dungeons, ranging from ancient burial catacombs to richly decorated temples, provides important insight into the plot as well as items necessary to progress in the quest to leave Har'Akir.

Stone Prophet is actually the third RPG developed by DreamForge using the same engine. The first of these is *Ravenloft: Strahd's Possession* (1994), which shares some common themes: after being drawn into a strange land crawling with undead, the party must find a way to defeat the dark lord of the land and secure their safe passage back home.

The second game is *Menzoberranzan* (1994), which is located in the highly popular Forgotten Realms setting. In order to rescue villagers captured by Drow, the party descends into the Underdark. On the way, they enlist the aid of Drizzt Do'Urden, the legendary Drow ranger. The party eventually becomes embroiled in a feud between various Drow houses of Menzoberranzan, in a bid to free the villagers and Drizzt himself.

Unfortunately, these games aren't quite as good, which led to the entire series being often overlooked. Regardless, *Ravenloft: Stone Prophet* is more than worth a look, and if you enjoy DreamForge's take on dungeon crawlers, perhaps give the other titles a try as well. **DD**

Exile:
Escape from the Pit

Exile
Escape From the Pit

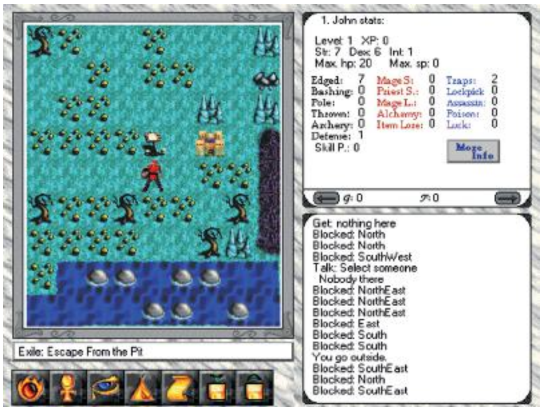
Spiderweb Software, 1995
Windows and Mac*

Exile: Escape from the Pit was the first of many games developed by Jeff Vogel at Spiderweb Software. A 2D, turn-based CRPG with party management and top-down perspective, it's probably best known now as the source of the *Avernum* games.

Spiderweb Software is one of the oldest independent game studios still active. Founded by Jeff Vogel and his wife Mariann Krizsan, it has released over 25 RPGs since 1994.

The backstory took a lot of fantasy tropes and twisted enough of them to make something unique. The land of Exile is a subsurface world where political enemies of the Empire and hardened criminals are sent via a one-way portal. Glowing moss on the rocks provides a poor light, while mushrooms, rock lizards, and underground streams allow bare survival. The people of Exile are beset by underground tribes of goblins, lizardmen and other threats without aid or care from the people of the Empire. And it seems a demon allied with the Emperor might be behind a series of other misfortunes.

As one might imagine, the people left here to die hold a strong grudge against the Empire. Since they feel as if they might be doomed anyway, they can at least strike back. And that's your quest – to find a way back to the surface and enact revenge.



```
1. John stats:

Level: 1  XP: 0
Str: 7  Dex: 6  Int: 1
Max. hp: 20    Max. sp: 0
Edged:    7  Mage S.:   0  Traps:    2
Bashing:  0  Priest S.: 0  Lockpick  0
Pole:     0  Mage L.:   0  Assassin: 0
Thrown:   0  Alchemy:   0  Poison:   0
Archery:  0  Item Lore: 0  Luck:     0
Defense:  1
Skill P.: 0

g: 0        f: 0

Get: nothing here
Blocked: North
Blocked: North
Blocked: SouthWest
Talk: Select someone
  Nobody there
Blocked: NorthEast
Blocked: NorthEast
Blocked: NorthEast
Blocked: East
Blocked: South
Blocked: South
You go outside.
Blocked: SouthEast
Blocked: North
Blocked: SouthEast
```

Starting with *Exile*'s underground prison world, Jeff Vogel's games have a tradition of featuring unique settings and premises

Before you can get said revenge, you will create a party of six characters and assign skill points and attributes to assist in whatever role each character is to take. Although you are going to need some heavily armed fighters, it's necessary to have a thief to handle traps and locks, a divine spellcaster for healing the party, and an arcane spellcaster to throw fireballs.

New points can be assigned to improve your characters upon gaining enough experience to level up, and there will be enough currency earned during your first quests to be able to afford decent armour and weapons. The best spells cannot be employed until characters build up enough skill to cast them, so forget about raining death upon those that oppose you right at the start.

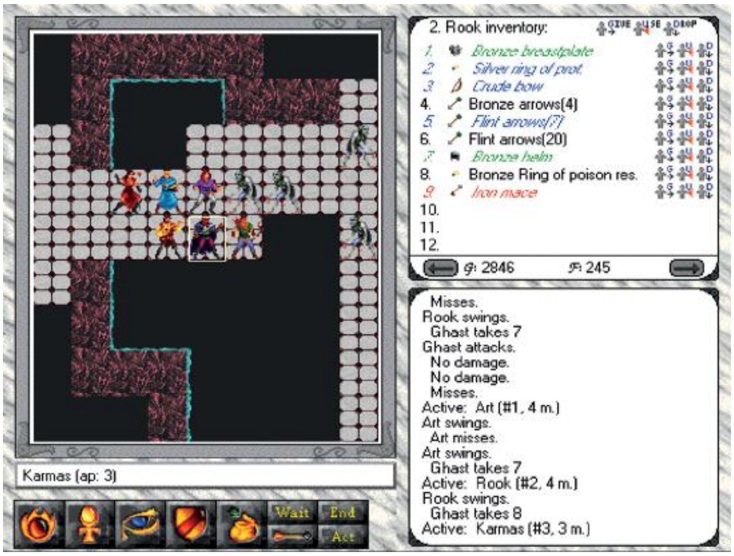
Also, expect characters to die a lot, so save early and save often. *Exile* is incredibly difficult unless you find several important hidden treasures, requiring you to invest a few hours in searching your surroundings. Although the enemies you encounter near the first town are a minor threat, wandering monsters become increasingly hard the further you get from civilisation.

Skills alone won't guarantee survival, meaning that you are going to have to loot dungeons in order to purchase better weapons or find secret stashes of magical equipment. This game was designed with completionists and explorers in mind.

Not everyone will want to kill you, and your party will find new allies during their quest. The negotiations your heroes conclude in *Exile* become important factors in future games, and a couple of new races become playable in the sequel.

These new relations drive the plot of this and future games, adding lore and a sense of wonder that's a credit to Vogel's design.

> "One of the biggest challenges [in remaking games] I've had is to just respect my younger self, to look at something and say, that's dumb, that's broken, that's out of control, and then just trust my younger self and trust my fans who loved this game and leave it be."
>
> *– Jeff Vogel,*
> Exile*'s creator and*
> *Spiderweb Software's founder*



```
2. Rook inventory:
1. Bronze breastplate
2. Silver ring of prot.
3. Crude bow
4. Bronze arrows(4)
5. Flint arrows(7)
6. Flint arrows(20)
7. Bronze helm
8. Bronze Ring of poison res.
9. Iron mace
10.
11.
12.
2846   245

Misses.
Rook swings.
 Ghast takes 7
Ghast attacks.
 No damage.
 No damage.
 Misses.
Active: Art (#1, 4 m.)
Art swings.
 Art misses.
Art swings.
 Ghast takes 7
Active: Rook (#2, 4 m.)
Rook swings.
 Ghast takes 8
Active: Karmas (#3, 3 m.)

Karmas (ap: 3)
```

Exile's combat is turn-based, with a party of up to six characters; Its remakes keep the high difficulty, but reduce the party to four characters

Originally released as shareware, *Exile* came out at the perfect time, as you can count the number of worthwhile CRPGs published in 1995 on one hand. Although isometric and first-person games were the norm during the mid-'90s, many players still fondly remembered *Ultima V*'s top-down graphics.

In fact, Vogel took many aspects of *Ultima V's* combat and improved upon them, making *Exile* a much better tactical RPG than its contemporaries – and the *Ultima* games themselves. Not a bad accomplishment for a game made entirely by one man.

Its success led to *Exile II: Crystal Souls* (1996), a larger sequel with more character creation options, and *Exile III: Ruined World* (1997), which blew its two predecessors out of the water in size and plot twists. *Blades of Exile* was released in the same year, adding three short scenarios and a game editor, creating a large modding community that still has websites and modules in existence today.

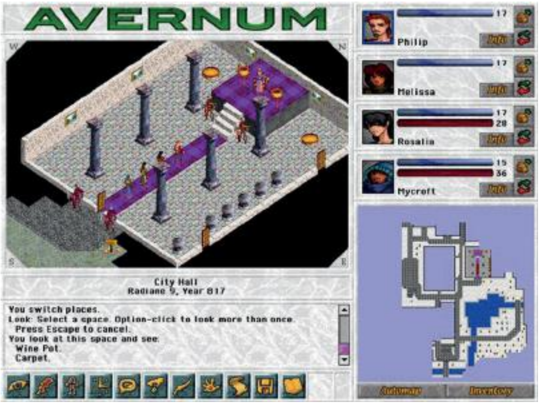
The popularity of the story led Spiderweb to revisit and update the original trilogy twice with more technically advanced game engines.

The first was in 2000, with *Avernum*. Vogel updated the interface, made the graphics isometric, expanded the story and renamed the underground world of Exile as Avernum. After remaking the original trilogy, Spiderweb created three more *Avernum* games, and a *Blades of Avernum* game editor.

In 2011, Vogel released *Avernum: Escape from the Pit*, once again updating the graphics and interface, rewriting the story and adding new side-content. As Sade says, it's never as good as the first time, as I consider the *Exile* trilogy to be the best series authored by Jeff Vogel despite the many other great works he has developed through the last two decades.

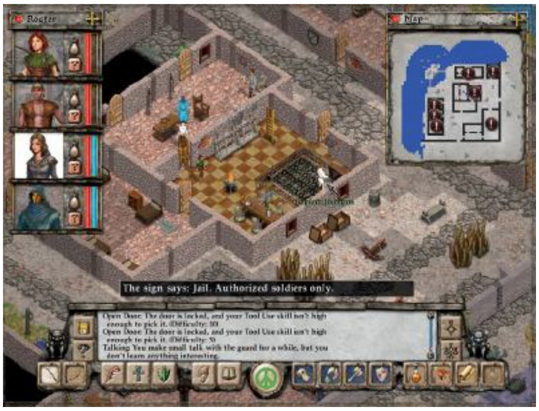
The original *Exile* trilogy is freeware now, freely available on Spiderweb's website, so prestigious gamers have no reason not to give it a go. **DT**

You can get the original *Exile* trilogy for free on Spiderweb's website, or buy the 2000s remakes as *Avernum: The Complete Saga* on GOG, and the 2010s remakes on Steam, GOG and Apple Store as *The Avernum Trilogy.*



```
City Hall
Radiane 9, Year 817

You switch places.
Look: Select a space. Option-click to look more than once.
  Press Escape to cancel.
You look at this space and see:
  Wine Pot.
  Carpet.
```

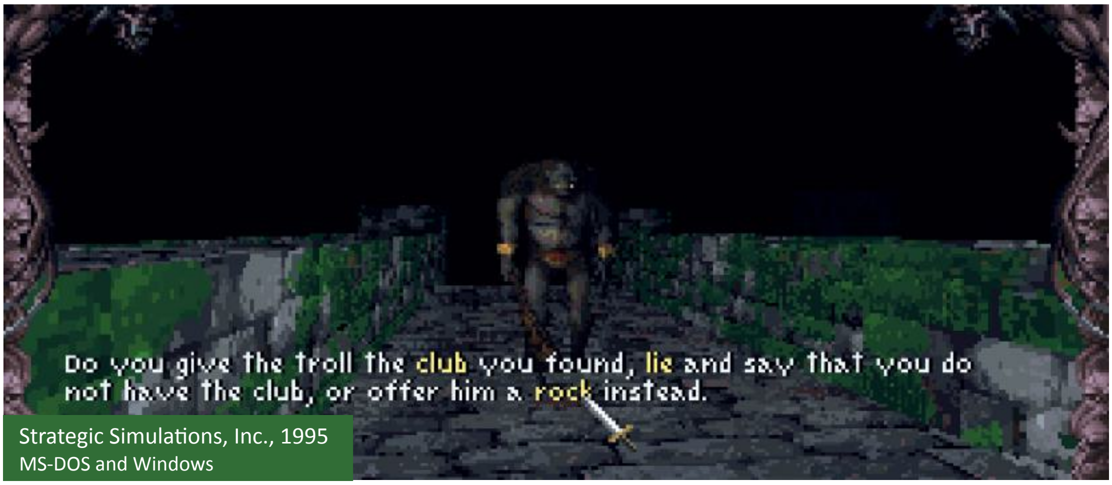
The first remake, *Avernum* (2000), was also released as shareware, and eventually became a six-game series



```
The sign says: Jail. Authorized soldiers only.

Open Door: The door is locked, and your Tool Use skill isn't high
  enough to pick it. (Difficulty: [illegible])
Open Door: The door is locked, and your Tool Use skill isn't high
  enough to pick it. (Difficulty: [illegible])
Talking: You make small talk with the guard for a while, but you
  don't learn anything interesting.
```

Avernum: Escape from the Pit (2011) is a remake of a remake, but also a great entry point for modern gamers

World of Aden: Thunderscape



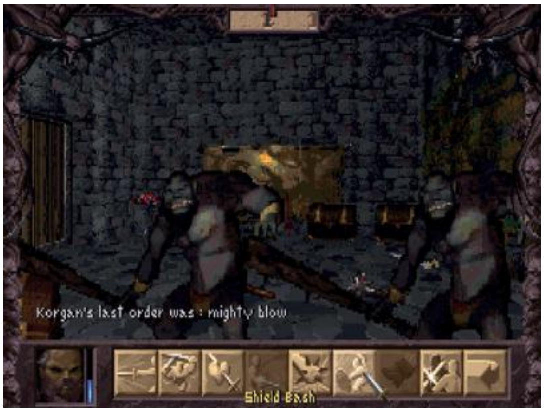
Do you give the troll the club you found, lie and say that you do not have the club, or offer him a rock instead.

Strategic Simulations, Inc., 1995
MS-DOS and Windows

After the decline in sales of their games during the early ’90s, SSI had lost the *AD&D* licence. So the company had Shane Hensley, author of *Deadlands* and *Savage Worlds*, create a new fantasy setting for their next games – the World of Aden.

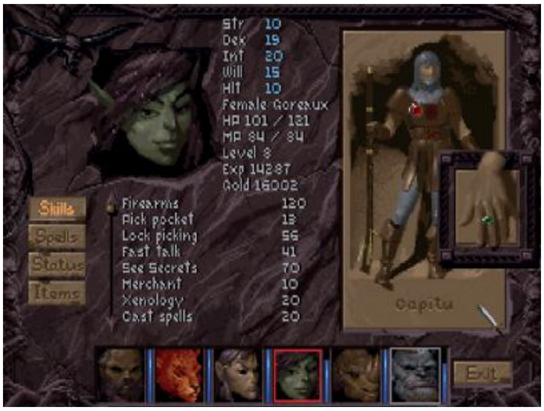
A peaceful world until a mysterious eclipse called the Darkfall brought demons into the land, Aden’s inhabitants employ both magic and technology to defend their world from the evil Nocturnals.

Three novels and a tabletop RPG based on the World of Aden setting were released in 1996, and in 2013 a sourcebook for Pathfinder was successfully kickstarted.



Korgan's last order was : mighty blow

The game offers a great variety of combat moves and tactical options, but the enemies are dull and easy to kill



Str 10
Dex 19
Int 20
Will 15
Hlt 10
Female Goreaux
HP 101 / 121
MP 84 / 84
Level 8
Exp 14287
Gold 16002

Firearms 120
Pick pocket 13
Lock picking 56
Fast talk 41
See Secrets 70
Merchant 10
Xenology 20
Cast spells 20

Each level up you gain a number of points you can use to improve your skills or learn new ones, but it’s advised to specialise your characters

Thunderscape is the first of the two games set in the World of Aden. In this 3D dungeon crawler, you start by creating a party of four characters using an original, classless ruleset, with 9 races, 5 attributes and 18 skills – including a few non-combat ones, such as Pickpockets, Lockpick, Fast Talk and Xenology.

You’re then taken to the bottom of a valley, where begins your quest to stop the Nocturnal army. While the graphics aren’t impressive, with brown muted colours and poor draw distance, it’s a fun start, as you climb the valley and come across a shop, an elevator, secrets, riddles and two NPCs you can recruit.

The combat system is especially well designed. Turn-based but fast, thanks to the efficient interface and quick animations, it also offers a great many options. There are over 20 combat moves, such as Berserk Attack, Mighty Blow, Kick, Shoot, Shield Bash, Feign, Aim for Vitals, Block Enemy Advance, Dodge, Backstab and even the Fast Talk skill to bribe or confuse enemies. Spells can also be tuned, as you can set how much mana to spend when casting them.

It’s a depth rarely seen in dungeon crawlers, but, unfortunately, it’s wasted on the game’s poor content. Most enemies are too easy and stupid to require full use of the combat system. Add a lot of backtracking plus rapidly respawning enemies and after a while you’ll get bored and just auto-attack everything.

And while the first area is content-rich, most others are giant, featureless maze-like levels that just want you to randomly explore until you find the key, item or lever you need to open the next level.

While it was innovative, *Thunderscape* feels like the shade of a much better game. Great systems are in place, but the content fails to take advantage of them, offering instead an easy, dull and repetitive experience. At least the guitar-driven soundtrack is excellent. **FE**

Entomorph: Plague of the Darkfall

Cyberlore Studios, 1995
Windows and Mac

The second game set in the World of Aden and the last RPG published by SSI, *Entomorph* is somewhat of a hybrid title, featuring a bit of puzzle and item-hunting, light role-playing elements and a heavy dose of arcade-like real-time combat.

However, the exotic setting and plot are where the game really shines. The island of Phoros was once a thriving nation, raising giant beetles for both labour and food. When an incident known as the Darkfall led the beetles to vanish, it fell into chaos. Ten years later, a group of nobles start to bring the beetles back into the island, but multiple reports of missing people and savage insect attacks begin to appear as well.

You play as Warrick, a squire who returns from training in search of his sister. The writers did not hold back and the game's story is full of odd twists, shifting gears between fantasy, sci-fi, body horror and even time travel, with a fully-voiced narrator adding flavour to scenes. Moreover, as spoiled by the box art, you'll slowly mutate into an insect during the game.

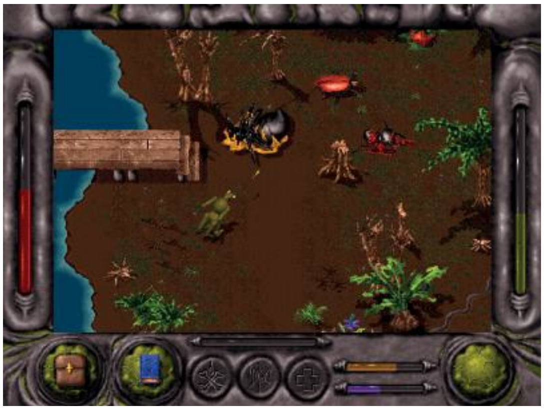
Unfortunately, there ends *Entomorph*'s appeal. The game uses *Al-Qadim*'s engine and tries to follow its blend of RPG, action and adventure, but none of the different elements work very well here. It opens with a village with interesting NPCs and a nice mystery to uncover but, while there are some amusing scenes, it quickly devolves into a rushed and unsatisfying story.

Combat is crude – there are no skills, armour or even weapons, you literally just punch your enemies. And there are no stats or experience points either – you only grow stronger by progressively mutating into an insect. The magic system is more robust, featuring 22 different spells, and you can set how much mana to spend when casting each one. A nice idea, but you have so little mana that you'll rarely cast anything but healing spells, except during the rare boss fights.

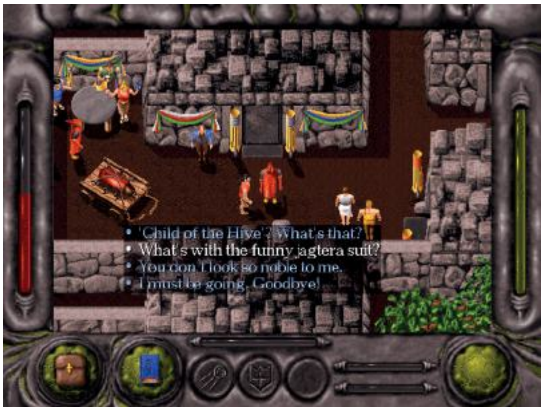
Above all, what really dooms *Entomorph* is just how frustrating its quests are. The game is horrible at directing players, and you'll likely spend hours walking without any clear goals, blindly trying to find a quest item or where you are supposed to go.

It's a shame, as the concept is refreshingly original, the presentation is very colourful and the guitar-driven soundtrack is a blast. Still, unless you are hunting for exotic games, it's best to skip *Entomorph*. **FE**

***Thunderscape* and *Entomorph* sold well, but by then SSI had already been sold, and the company's new owners cancelled any further World of Aden games.**



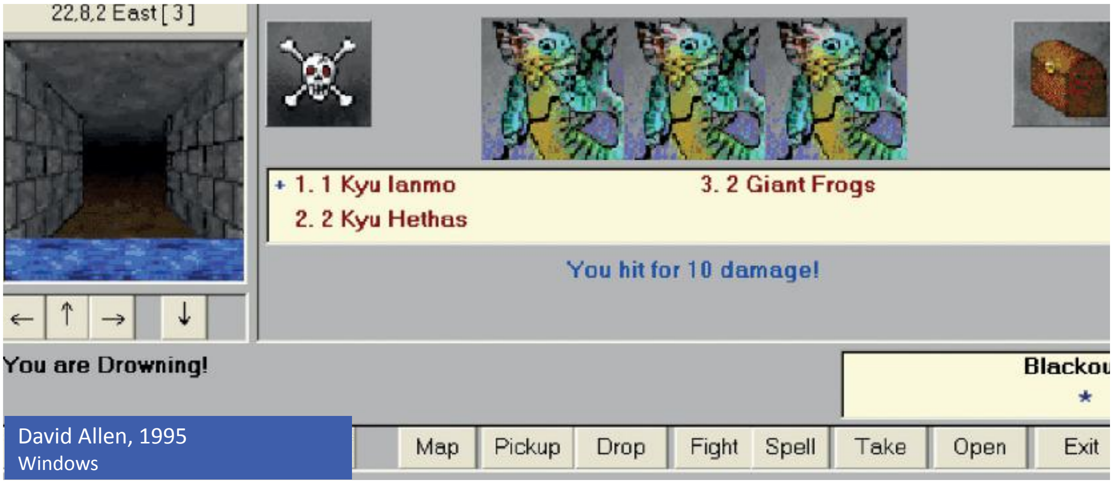
You'll morph into a giant mantis as the game advances, changing your fighting style; more insects will appear as well, and the island's vegetation will slowly be destroyed



- 'Child of the Hive'? What's that?
- What's with the funny jagtera suit?
- You don't look so noble to me.
- I must be going. Goodbye!

The story and lore of *Entomorph* are quite interesting, but the dialogues are dry and the NPCs still feel primitive, mostly dumping exposition on the player

Mordor:
Depths of Dejenol



22,8,2 East [3]

1. 1 Kyu Ianmo

2. 2 Kyu Hethas

3. 2 Giant Frogs

You hit for 10 damage!

You are Drowning!

Blackou

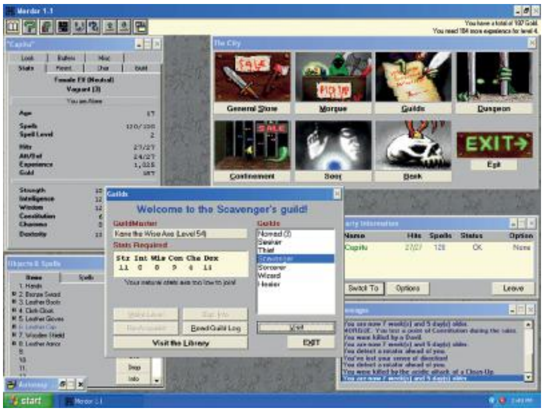
David Allen, 1995
Windows

Fans at Braindead's Mordor Site created several tools and mods for *Mordor*, and have also been working on a remake, named *Mordor XP: The Demise of Dejenol*.

Mordor: Depths of Dejenol is a MUD-inspired dungeon crawler created by David Allen. It went largely unnoticed at the time of release but has since attained cult status and spawned a series of reiterations. The game it grew into, *Demise*, is still active and expecting its second expansion.

The story is uninspired and boils down to uncovering and defeating an ancient evil. Tackling the game's staging area – a foreboding, labyrinthine dungeon complex – is more enticing. You can do so by embracing one of several diverse play styles, all with their strengths and shortcomings. Planning character development and party composition beforehand is key to getting anywhere in *Mordor*. It might even be necessary to lay the groundwork with disposable characters you don't mind abandoning once they've picked up their share of tomes and potions.

Starting your first adventure is a daunting task. Checking the manual and help lessons out is vital if you don't want to end up with a flawed character who can't cut it at the deeper levels. Even then, death is a constant companion.



Welcome to the Scavenger's guild!

The Windows-based interface is dated and unfriendly, but allows for customisation and quick play once you're familiarised

Race, alignment and guilds all make a difference. The guilds initially help with resurrection costs, but unprepared players may find themselves with dead characters they've put dozens of hours into without any means of getting them back. *Mordor* swiftly and mercilessly punishes the ignorant or cocky adventurer.

Your journey begins in a hub town with services that provide equipment, levelling and questing opportunities along with places to store your hard-earned gold, raise dead comrades and heal wounds.

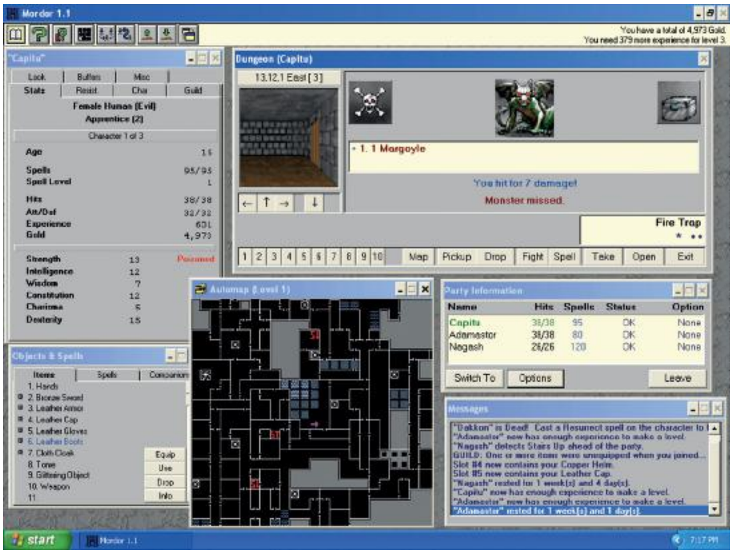
You'll make frequent trips to the surface, but most of the game revolves around exploring ever deeper and slaughtering the local wildlife. Nasty surprises await at every turn. Anti-magic and underwater areas, teleporters, and quicksand you can lose your items in are just the minor threats. Don't forget trap chests that can do anything from displacing or poisoning party members to killing them outright. There is only one dungeon, but it spans 15 floors laid out in a 30 × 30 grid.

Semi-automatic real-time with pause combat is the staple of *Mordor*'s gameplay. Its basic form consists of initiating a fight and watching as rounds play out with no further input until the monsters die. Larger groups and harder foes require a more active approach, however. Fights that would be impossible to win with brute force become manageable once you pause to cast the right spells, assign different targets, and defend weaker party members.

You'll encounter a vast menagerie ranging from fantasy tropes to more obscure foes like balls of energy. The undead are particularly annoying, since they can permanently decrease health & stats. Mundane or weird, all monsters in *Mordor* are beautifully illustrated. Some denizens are timid; others cast spells or can instantly kill you by decapitation or stoning. A few will even talk to you or join and become companions.

"PLATO featured hundreds of games ranging from *Airfight* to *Solitaire*. When I was only eight years old, I was exposed to version IV of this system by my father, who worked for Control Data Corporation (CDC). He would take me to work with him during the weekends and put me in the PLATO room which featured numerous terminals and printers and leave me be for hours. It was nirvana for me […] My games, *Mordor* and *Demise*, were based on my experience with *Avatar* and *Journey*."

– David Allen,
Mordor's creator



You have a total of 4,973 Gold.
You need 379 more experience for level 3.

Female Human (Evil)
Apprentice (2)
Character 1 of 3

Age	15
Spells	95/95
Spell Level	1
Hits	38/38
Att/Def	32/32
Experience	631
Gold	4,973

Strength	13	Poisoned
Intelligence	12	
Wisdom	7	
Constitution	12	
Charisma	5	
Dexterity	15	

13.12.1 East [3]

1. 1 Margoyle

You hit for 7 damage!

Monster missed.

Fire Trap

Name	Hits	Spells	Status	Option
Capitu	38/38	95	OK	None
Adamastor	38/38	80	OK	None
Nagash	26/26	120	OK	None

"Dakkon" is Dead! Cast a Resurrect spell on the character to
"Adamastor" now has enough experience to make a level.
"Nagash" detects Stairs Up ahead of the party.
GUILD: One or more items were unequipped when you joined...
Slot #4 now contains your Copper Helm.
Slot #5 now contains your Leather Cap.
"Nagash" rested for 1 week(s) and 4 day(s).
"Capitu" now has enough experience to make a level.
"Adamastor" now has enough experience to make a level.
"Adamastor" rested for 1 week(s) and 1 day(s).

While you can pause to give direct orders, combat is mostly automatic; *Mordor*'s real focus is on carefully building the perfect party and managing your resources

Characters improve by gaining levels in their respective guilds and finding better loot. The items you discover aren't as diverse as in other games, especially in the beginning. However, each is unique and recognisable. All serve a specific purpose, and there are no fillers or randomly generated ones. Some are cursed, but that's a different matter.

A single character can join all the guilds their alignment and race allow, but that becomes prohibitive due to huge XP requirements later on. Guild levels go up into the hundreds, even thousands! Neglecting one guild while focusing on another results in severe penalties once you decide to catch up. A balanced party mitigates this, but the weakness of individual members makes for slow delving in return. Whichever method you pursue, be prepared for a LOT of grinding.

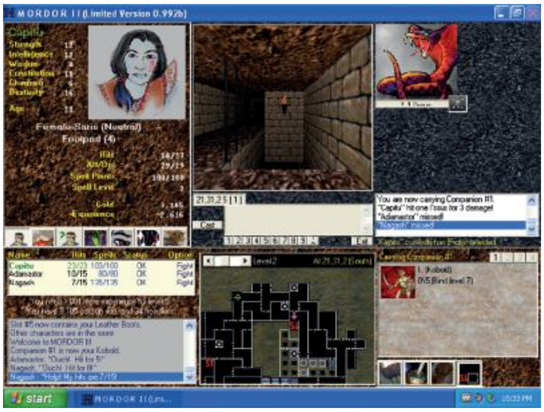
After the release of *Mordor*, David Allen began working on a sequel – *Mordor 2: Darkness Awakening*, blending 3D environments with 2D monsters.

He then made a deal with Interplay to publish it, renaming it *Infinite Worlds*, but unfortunately, the partnership didn't work out. In 1999, the game finally came out, entitled *Demise: Rise of the Ku'tan*.

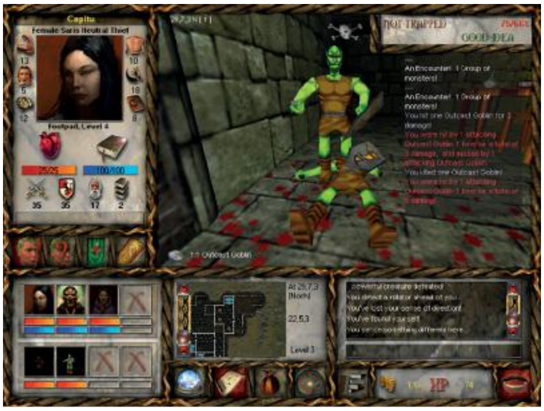
Demise features fully 3D graphics, multiplayer and expands the dungeon to 30 massive levels, each 45 × 45 squares wide, with specific tilesets and unique locations like beaches, swamps and graveyards. While critics unanimously bashed the game, it developed a cult following. David Allen went on to work on MMOs, but sold the game's licence to a fan, who continues to update the game – the *Revenge of the Tavern Keeper* expansion is due for release in 2022.

Mordor and *Demise* are an acquired if addicting taste. The planning, vast amount of grind, and prospect of suffering a major setback whenever you descend are certainly not for everyone. Nevertheless, they possess a one-of-a-kind feel and identity that drives the determined adventurer ever deeper. **OU**

In 2004 a group of fans created *Demise - The Revelation*, an expanded version of *Demise* that was freely available for download. It has since been taken down.



The *Mordor 2* and *Infinite Worlds* betas are still available online*;* while buggy, *Mordor 2* is highly regarded by fans



Demise's crude 3D graphics were already dated in 1999, but the insane size of its dungeons remains unmatched

Albion

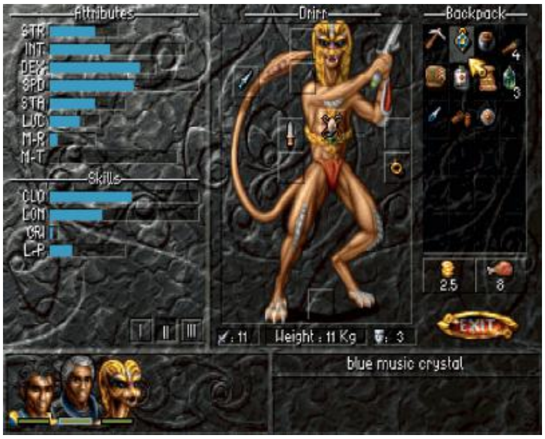
Blue Byte Software, 1995
MS-DOS

***Albion* began as a sequel to *Ambermoon*, but Thalion Software closed down and the development team moved to Blue Byte, creating a new story and setting.**

In 1995 I went to my local computer shop and asked the owner for a new good game. He knew my preference for role-playing games and suggested a game called *Albion*, from Blue Byte Software. A sci-fi RPG made by German developers?

I was a bit sceptical at first, but after hearing that the game designers were also involved in *Amberstar* and *Ambermoon* – two of my all-time favourites – I was convinced and bought the game. I was starving for a new good CRPG and was positively surprised when I realised after a few hours of playing that I was already in love with this new, fantastic game.

First of all, *Albion* shines with an immersive and detailed story. In the 23rd century, powerful multinational companies from Earth try to mine natural resources from uninhabited planets with great mining spaceships. You play Tom Driscoll, a pilot from the mining ship Toronto who crashes with his shuttle during a reconnaissance flight onto the exotic planet Albion. Albion is supposed to be a barren world, ready to be mined, but Tom discovers quickly that nothing could be further from the truth.



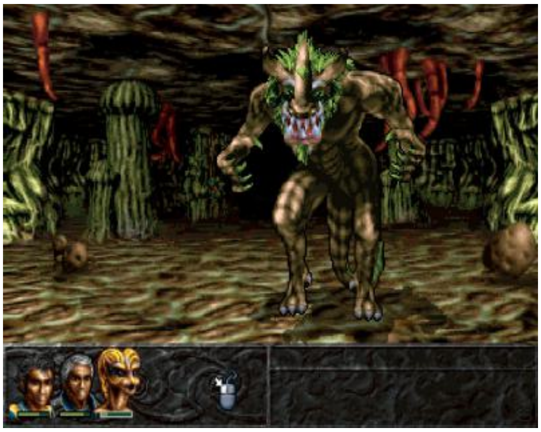
Each race and class has access to different items, equipment and spells: for example, the Iskai can wield extra small weapons with their tails

Barely surviving the crash, you wake up in a village, surrounded by Iskai – exotic and intelligent cat-like creatures. Together with your scientist partner, Rainer, you must earn their trust through good deeds and intelligent conversation, while trying to find a way to warn the mining ship about its mistake.

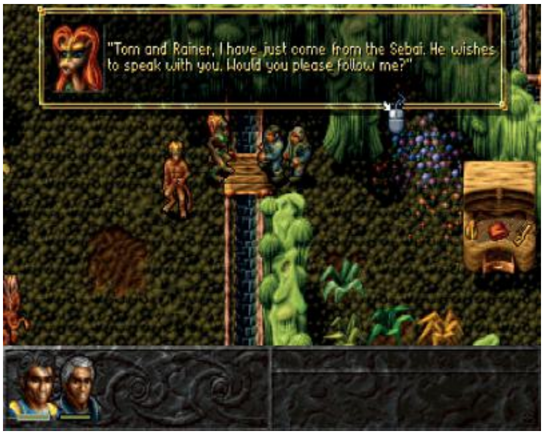
Albion is full of alien tribes and factions to interact with, historic places to explore, rich and varied landscapes and various useful equipment to find. Blue Byte decided to make a game for a mature audience that addresses alien first-contact, environmentalism and anti-capitalism, as in the 2009 movie *Avatar*. The story also features some twists, betrayal, murder and ancient Celtic magic.

The main plot is linear, but each major location offers plenty of things to discover. You can feel that the level design in *Albion* is a labour of love. Every little detail, creature, item and puzzle is carefully planned, created and placed manually. Around every corner, a new little adventure or secret is waiting to be discovered. This makes exploring a rewarding and exciting experience. The limited inventory, the deep dungeons, the serious wounds or conditions, the lack of provisions, the need for rest and some adventure game-style puzzles will force you to backtrack quite a lot. And you'll discover many optional areas as well.

Albion is a very long game, with over 166 NPCs and 60 different monsters, and interacting with them is always interesting: you can ask everyone about many topics (listed in a dialogue screen) or type in keywords to learn about new topics, secrets, culture, language, quests, potions, gossip and relations. The story develops slowly, through interacting with people, so you have to read, guess and ask a lot. Of course often you'll only get answers by doing some side-quests and sometimes by recruiting new party members.

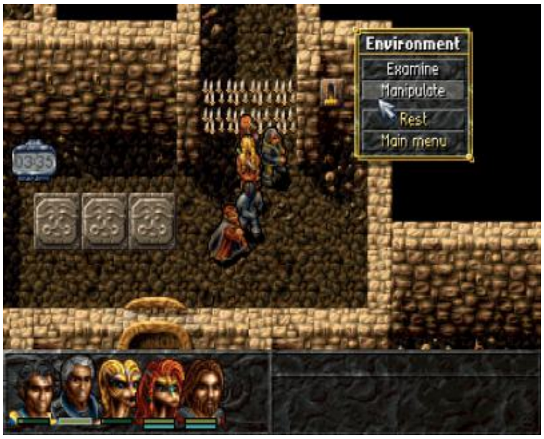


Albion features various different types of perspective; dungeons are usually explored in a 3D first-person view

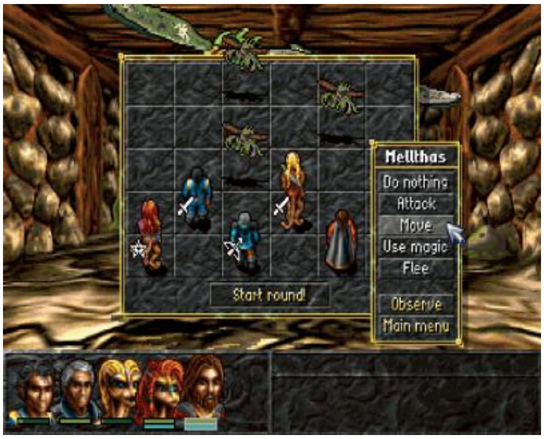


"Tom and Rainer, I have just come from the Sebai. He wishes to speak with you. Would you please follow me?"

Inside buildings you usually play with an isometric view, exploring rich environments full of items and NPCs



But not all dungeons are in first-person; some of the more puzzle-intense ones are explored in isometric view



When a monster reaches you, combat begins: it's turn-based, set on a 6 × 5 tactical grid and very challenging

You can build a party with up to six members. Each party member has a predefined class and a specific background related to the story, and every character has an inventory which is limited by their strength, so you'll have to micromanage your items and provisions. *Albion* features many different items, some with very unique purposes. For example, you'll only get an in-game time display if you find a watch at some point in the game, which is good for monitoring the day-night cycle and the shops' opening hours.

Battles are turn-based, very challenging and take place in on a 5 × 6 grid. Combat is very tactical, featuring a whopping 52 spells, and enemies are quite clever, so be prepared. As long as one party member survives, you can heal the rest of the party after battle. Strategic positioning of the characters on the battlefield and tactical decisions like protecting magic-users, getting the first attack by moving a character relative to the enemy, luring enemies into weapon/spell ranges etc. are critical to winning.

Albion has beautiful graphics, featuring a 2D/3D hybrid system. When in most towns and dungeons the game switches to a 3D first-person view, while in interior locations and outdoor areas a 2D isometric view is used. The controls are simple and easy to learn, and the game includes a helpful automap feature.

With *Albion*, Blue Byte has created a fully believable alien world including the fauna, flora and architecture. Exploration is interesting; there are a lot of NPCs to interact with; and you'll have to learn their customs and culture to succeed. The storyline is gripping, with many surprises, and the whole game features many different gameplay elements, boasting an attention to detail rarely found elsewhere.

Albion is a beautiful, fascinating, serious and entertaining game that I recommend to all CRPG fans patient and mature enough to understand and enjoy demanding game mechanics and challenging tactical combat.

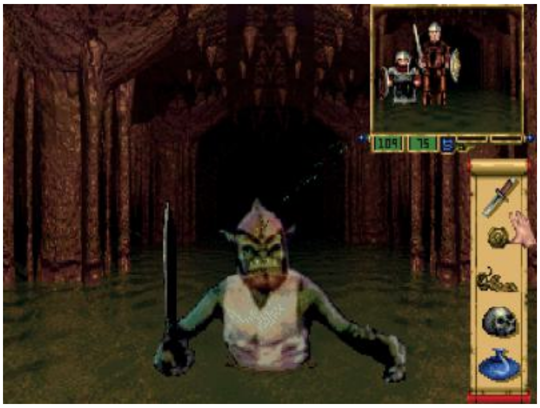
Dsarii-ma, my friends! **HX**

Stonekeep

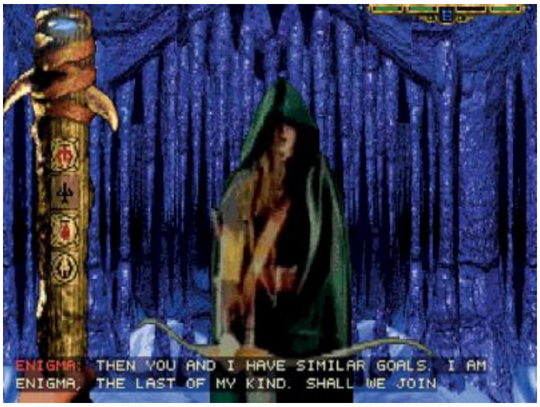
Interplay, 1995
MS-DOS

Stonekeep always makes me think of the adventure films of the '80s, like *Labyrinth* and *The Neverending Story*, mostly due to how film-like the game is. Drake, the naive, young protagonist, is thrust into a fantasy world to battle magical beasts, joined by strange but loyal companions as he strives to confront the Big Baddie and save the day. Shame the game didn't sport a synth-pop soundtrack or it would be an all-time classic.

***Stonekeep* was one of the most hyped RPGs of the early 90s. Its development took 7 years and had a massive cost of 5 million USD. It sold over 300,000 units, an impressive feat at the time.**



Combat is real-time, but you can pause to use items; eventually you'll be joined by companions, who help fight automatically



ENIGMA: THEN YOU AND I HAVE SIMILAR GOALS. I AM ENIGMA, THE LAST OF MY KIND. SHALL WE JOIN

Although it aged poorly, the extensive use of FMV was one of *Stonekeep*'s selling points. Reportedly, its intro sequence alone cost more than the entire budget for *Ultima Underworld*

The FMV intro tells of a castle named Stonekeep that is attacked by a great evil. Only Drake survives and, as he returns years later to learn what happened, he is set on an epic quest to save a pantheon of gods from peril. Nothing new there really, except everything in *Stonekeep* is about immersion. Video replaces pixels, voice acting replaces text and even the game's interface is justified as being magical artefacts.

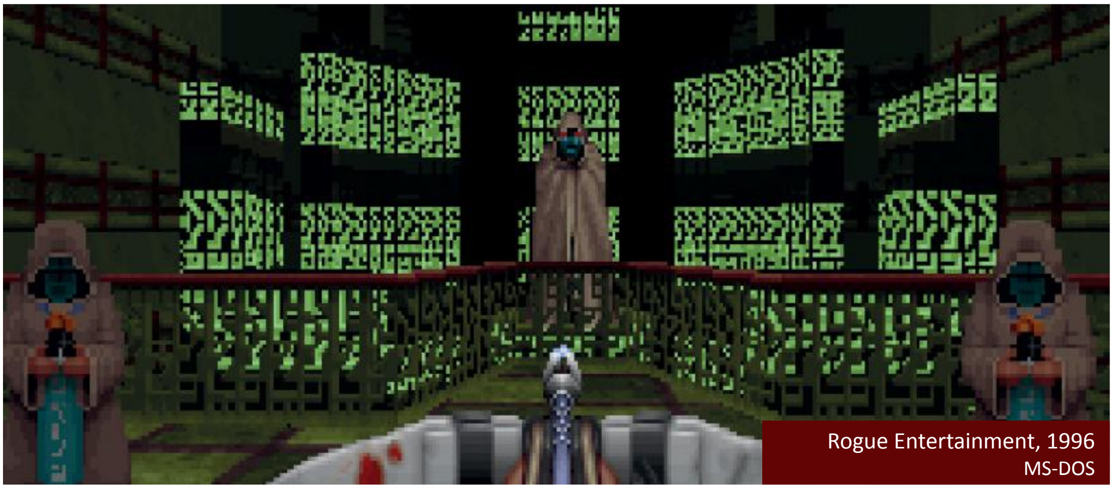
Speaking of magic, the game's magic system is quite ingenious. Basic rune-like symbols represent different spells, but they can also be mixed with other symbols to get neat upgrades, leading to a remarkably flexible system. By comparison, the combat system is of the "whack things with it to get better at it" variety, which gets the job done.

But *Stonekeep*'s strength doesn't lie in its graphics or game design, but in the characters you meet. Stout dwarves, cowardly greenskins, creepy undead and singing fairies are part of a wide cast of characters with actual personalities that stick with you long after you've stopped playing (especially the fairies). All of this gives *Stonekeep* a somewhat light-humoured atmosphere that still holds up today.

If this game has a flaw, then it is the fact that beneath all that sparkle is just a simple grid-based dungeon crawler, which feels restrictive and out of keeping with the graphics. Another low point is the uneven flow of the second half of the game, in which exposition is either dumped on the player in large amounts, or scattered about so scarcely that it takes effort to even find it, leaving players wondering where they are or what they're supposed to be doing.

Like those child-like adventure films of the '80s, *Stonekeep* is no outstanding milestone, but its innate charm and the rosy tint of nostalgia help make it a fondly cherished game nevertheless. **ÁV**

Strife:
Quest for the Sigil



Rogue Entertainment, 1996
MS-DOS

ShadowCaster first attempted to blend FPS/RPG elements back in 1993, and the following years saw other hybrids such as *Hexen*, *Witchaven*, *System Shock* and *CyberMage*. Yet the game most often remembered as "the first FPS/RPG" is *Strife*.

There's a reason for that. Even the first minutes of *Strife* feel very different. You start the game, fight a couple of guards and then, instead of killing demons, you walk into a peaceful town, with various shops, a bar and some interactive NPCs sharing gossip.

You're then contacted via radio by "Blackbird", who asks you to join The Front, an underground resistance against the evil theocracy of The Order. This isn't just some throwaway backstory – you'll actually go to the rebels' HQ and work with them.

Your first objective is to take over The Order's base in town. For that you'll have to perform a few sabotage missions and trade favours with NPCs – all of whom have charming voice acting and portraits. Once the base's defences are down, you'll attack it alongside rebel troops, kill the enemy general and move your HQ there! It's a nice, satisfying pay-off.

After that, the town's gate opens and you're sent to another location, to further battle the forces of The Order. The world is hub-based, with the maps linking together to form an overworld, of sorts, that you can freely explore, though the main quest is mostly linear.

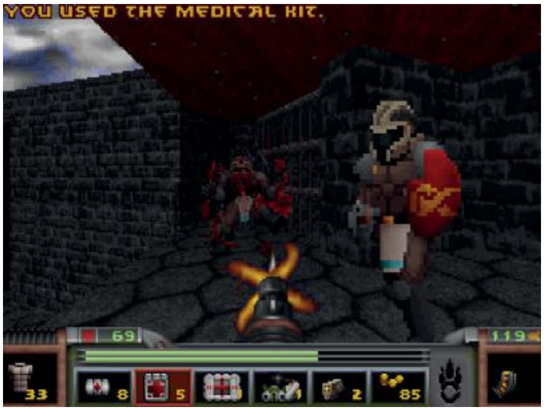
Some of your missions can also involve stealth, meaning disguising yourself and only killing enemies with poisoned crossbow bolts. As your quest advances, you'll uncover more about The Order, learn about the mythic Sigil and experience some great plot twists.

You'll also gain access to new weapons and upgrades, such as a grenade launcher or increased accuracy stat. Just be sure to carefully manage your money between health kits, armour and ammo.

Finally, while most of the dialogue options are illusionary, there's a choice about half the way into the game that forks the game into two different routes, each with different missions and endings.

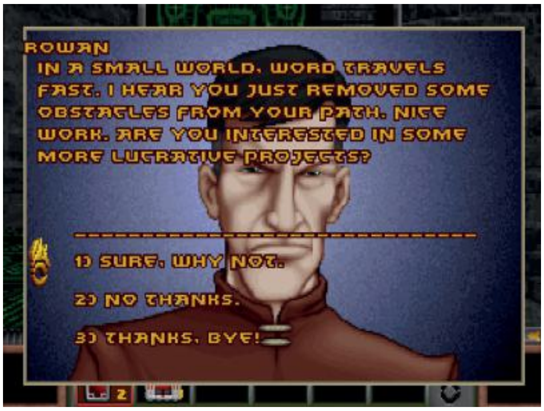
Strife was the last game to use the *Doom* engine, which was already heavily dated. But, while other FPSs focused on new 3D graphics, *Strife* presented a new path for the genre, with memorable NPCs, an early open world and a cool, branching story. **FE**

***Strife* was re-released in 2014 on Steam as *Strife: Veteran Edition*, using an engine based on *Chocolate Doom*. Many improvements were added, and its source code is freely available.**



YOU USED THE MEDICAL KIT.

Strife's combat isn't the best among the *Doom* clones, but it presents some great set-pieces and fun weapons

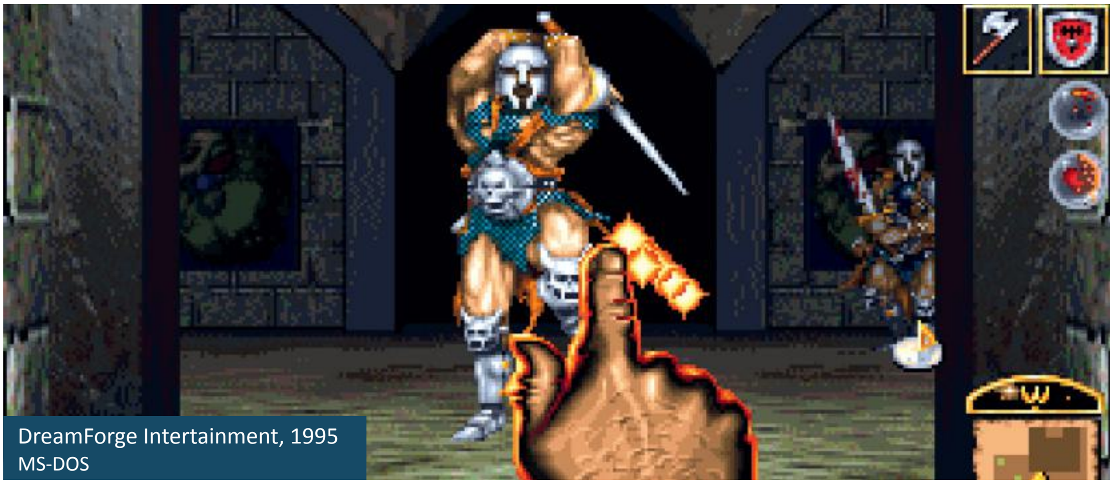


ROWAN
IN A SMALL WORLD, WORD TRAVELS FAST. I HEAR YOU JUST REMOVED SOME OBSTACLES FROM YOUR PATH. NICE WORK. ARE YOU INTERESTED IN SOME MORE LUCRATIVE PROJECTS?

1) SURE, WHY NOT.
2) NO THANKS.
3) THANKS, BYE!

Dialogue choices are mostly pointless: here the first choice begins the main quest line, the second one kills you and the third one just ends the dialogue

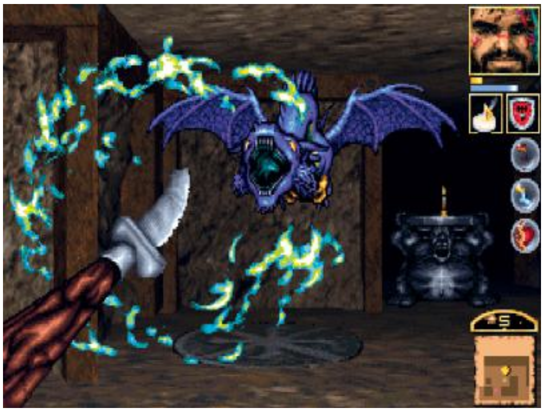
Anvil of Dawn

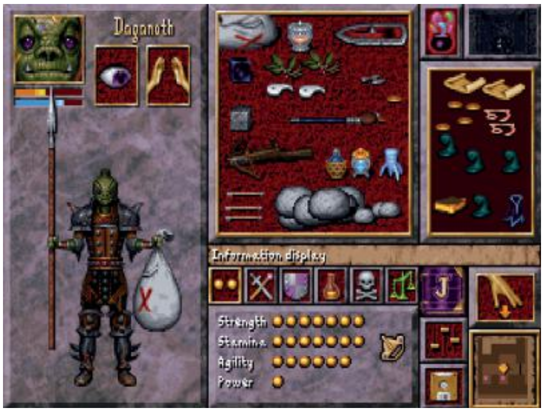

DreamForge Intertainment, 1995
MS-DOS

***Anvil of Dawn* got voted “RPG of the Year” by CGW, but was Dreamforge’s last RPG. They would still publish a few other titles, such as the cult adventure game *Sanitarium* in 1998, before closing down in 2001.**

You begin *Anvil of Dawn* by choosing one of five heroes who have gathered to bring down the evil Warlord. However, while the other four heroes are sent ahead to attack the invading army head on, you are taken aside for a covert mission, tasked to find the secret behind the Warlord’s power.

Anvil follows in the footsteps of *Lands of Lore*, mixing a slick presentation with a more accessible brand of real-time dungeon crawling.


Combat is rather simple and does not require much more than clicking your opponents to death



The interface is mouse-driven and intuitive, but the inventory can get confusing later on, when carrying dozens of items and containers

There are just four base attributes, and these can only be tinkered with on the character selection screen. To increase your powers further, you’ll have to find items such as potions that permanently increase your hit and spell points. You will also spend experience points to increase the potency of your spells and the damage of your weapon attacks. These experience points are earned by inflicting damage, and may only be spent once you have completed a dungeon.

Every NPC you meet is fully voiced and there’s a unique voice set for each of the different player characters as well. The delivery of said voices may not always be very convincing, but at least the effort has provided some good variety. James C. McMenamy has created a great, dynamic (even sometimes bombastic) soundtrack for the game, which is an impressive feat considering its MIDI format.

The automap in *Anvil of Dawn* is one the game’s strongest points, and it has many times been called one of the best automaps in role-playing game history. It shows anything you would want to see: monsters (alive or dead), doors, stairs, interactive objects, and much more. It even shows walls and outlines from where you have explored in previous games. True map aficionados can also print maps of the game’s massive dungeons, or export them to text files.

Anvil of Dawn won the “RPG of the Year” award from Computer Gaming World in 1996, triumphing over heavyweight releases like *Might and Magic IV* and *Stonekeep*. It features fantastic aesthetics, great exploration within varied environments and an almost unparalleled automapping system.

It may not be a favourite among hardcore dungeon dwellers due to its simplistic character development, but I’d say it’s a great starting place for anyone new to dungeon crawlers. **ZE**

Dungeons & Dragons: Shadow over Mystara

Capcom, 1996
Windows, Arcade, PS3 and Xbox 360

Back in 1991, Capcom released *King of Dragons*, a side-scrolling beat-‘em-up arcade game. It expanded the barbarian theme of *Golden Axe* (1989) into a full-blown *AD&D*-like setting, allowing up to three players to each choose a Fighter, Dwarf, Elf, Cleric or Wizard and battle orcs, dragons, gnolls and other fantasy creatures, as well as level up, gaining more hit points, armour and damage.

While *KoD* was simplistic, Capcom invested in the formula and released *Dungeons & Dragons: Tower of Doom* in 1993. Now an official *D&D* title, it allowed for up to four players and featured a Fighter, Cleric, Elf and Dwarf battling against iconic creatures such as Owlbears, Displacer Beasts and a Lich.

The gameplay was greatly improved, allowing players to block, riposte, roll, dash, slide and perform special attacks. The Elf and the Cleric could cast a limited number of spells each life/continue/area, such as Invisibility, Turn Undead, Hold Person and Magic Missile, with more being learned as they level up.

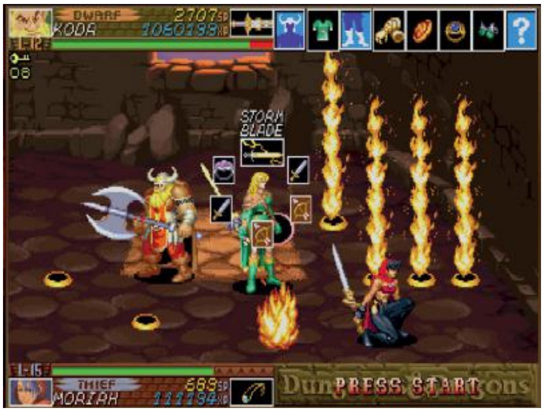
Multiple items are available, such as throwing daggers, +1 arrows, magical rings and power-ups like the Boots of Speed or the Gauntlets of Ogre Power. Players could spend the gold they collected in shops between areas, and occasionally the party was able to choose where they wanted to explore next.

Tower of Doom was already impressive, but its sequel, *Shadow over Mystara,* improved the formula in every way. New melee attacks were possible and an inventory allowed you to equip different weapons, armour and items. Two more heroes were added – the Wizard is a glass cannon with powerful spells like Meteor Swarm and Power Word Kill, while the Thief is a nimble fighter, able to pick locks on chests, disarm traps and double-jump. Even the graphics are better, as the new art assets sport a unique, stylised look.

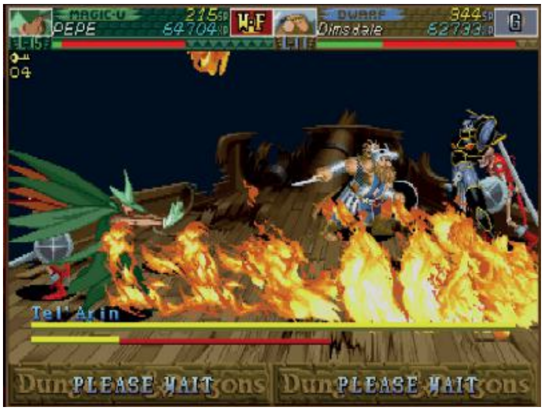
Moreover, the game is packed with well-hidden secrets. The Elf can guide the party through a forest side-path, the Cleric can uncurse mysterious blades, body parts of defeated monsters can be used to craft equipment and so on. It’s a delightful game to explore.

Although they are beat-‘em-ups, you can feel the developer’s passion for RPGs. Both the *D&D* games were ported to PCs as the *Chronicles of Mystara* bundle in 2013 and are a must-play for arcade fans. **FE**

Using the *OpenBOR* engine, fans created sequels to *SoM*, such as *Knights and Dragons* and *D&D: The Rise of Warduke* – two amazing open-world beat-‘em-up RPGs.



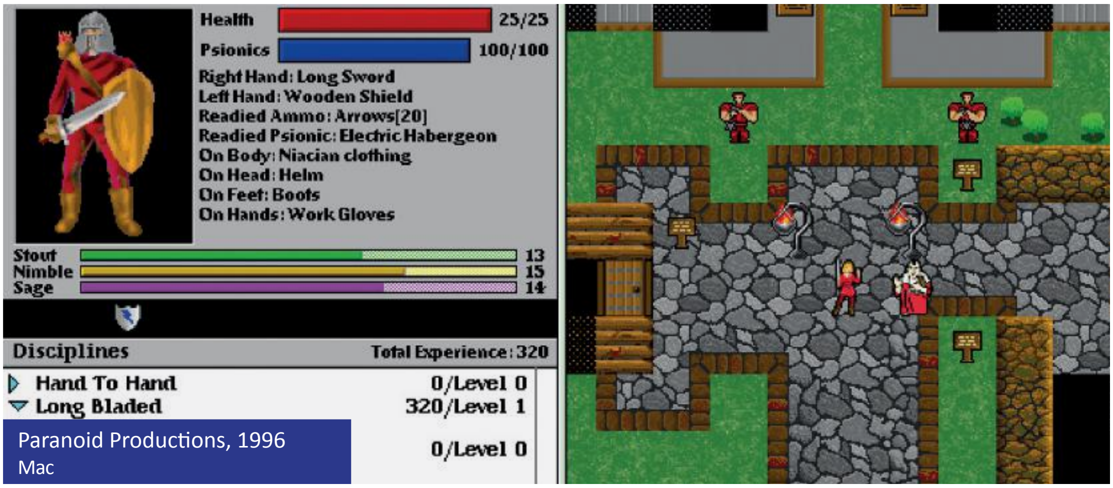
The inventory is a great addition to the beat-‘em-up formula, as you hunt for hidden equipment and adapt yourself to each challenge



Each of the six characters has an alternate sprite set, which comes with different spells and items, effectively offering twelve unique characters

Odyssey:

The Legend of Nemesis



Health 25/25

Psionics 100/100

Right Hand: Long Sword

Left Hand: Wooden Shield

Readied Ammo: Arrows[20]

Readied Psionic: Electric Habergeon

On Body: Niacian clothing

On Head: Helm

On Feet: Boots

On Hands: Work Gloves

Stout 13

Nimble 15

Sage 14

Disciplines | Total Experience: 320

Hand To Hand 0/Level 0

Long Bladed 320/Level 1

0/Level 0

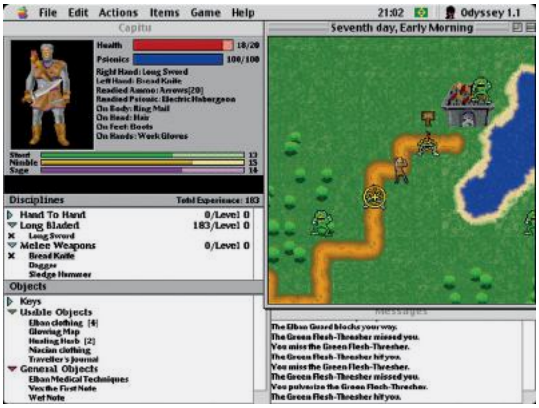
Paranoid Productions, 1996
Mac

My first exposure to *Odyssey: The Legend of Nemesis* was through the demo, which I found on a MacAddict magazine coverdisk. At first, it seemed like a typical RPG; after washing up on an island and befriending a hermit, I grabbed some items, and started thwacking monsters. But it was a polished and attractive game, so I stuck with it.

***Odyssey* was made freely available in 2004, and can be downloaded at Paranoid Productions' website.**

Then I encountered the two towns on the island: Niac and Elba. Elba had excellent food and advanced medicine, whereas Niac had a powerful military force and, put simply, a better arts program. They'd been at war for as long as anyone could remember, which isn't a surprise given that their names are anagrams for Cain and Abel. It wasn't long before I realised I wouldn't find a big baddie at the end of a dungeon here. Instead, I was supposed to help foster a cultural exchange between the two cities, giving hope for a new age of peace. Oh, and possibly help two star-crossed lovers stuck on opposing sides of the feud.

Thus began a journey across an archipelago, with each island appearing to be some form of social experiment, created by a being known as Nemesis.



Seventh day, Early Morning

Health 18/20

Psionics 100/100

Right Hand: Long Sword

Left Hand: Bread Knife

Readied Ammo: Arrows[20]

Readied Psionic: Electric Habergeon

On Body: Ring Mail

On Head: Hair

On Feet: Boots

On Hands: Work Gloves

Stout 13

Nimble 15

Sage 14

Disciplines | Total Experience: 183

Hand To Hand 0/Level 0

Long Bladed 183/Level 0

× Long Sword

Melee Weapons 0/Level 0

× Bread Knife

Dagger

Sledge Hammer

Objects

Keys

Usable Objects

Elban clothing [4]

Glowing Map

Healing Herb [2]

Niacian clothing

Traveller's Journal

General Objects

Elban Medical Techniques

Vex the First Note

Wet Note

The Elban Guard blocks your way.
The Green Flesh-Thresher missed you.
You miss the Green Flesh-Thresher.
The Green Flesh-Thresher hit you.
You miss the Green Flesh-Thresher.
The Green Flesh-Thresher missed you.
You pulverize the Green Flesh-Thresher.
The Green Flesh-Thresher hit you.

Combat is very primitive: you simply target an enemy and then choose to attack using the right-hand, the left hand or psionics – it's not the focus of the game, but some islands have long dungeons and many wild monsters

The second island, Culn, explores the importance of faith in people's lives and how it can be exploited, which could be read as a critique of organised religion, cults, or both. Meanwhile, on the island of Rochelle, the citizens live under martial law, with one group of rebels calling for the murder of the ruler, and another hoping to find a less bloody solution.

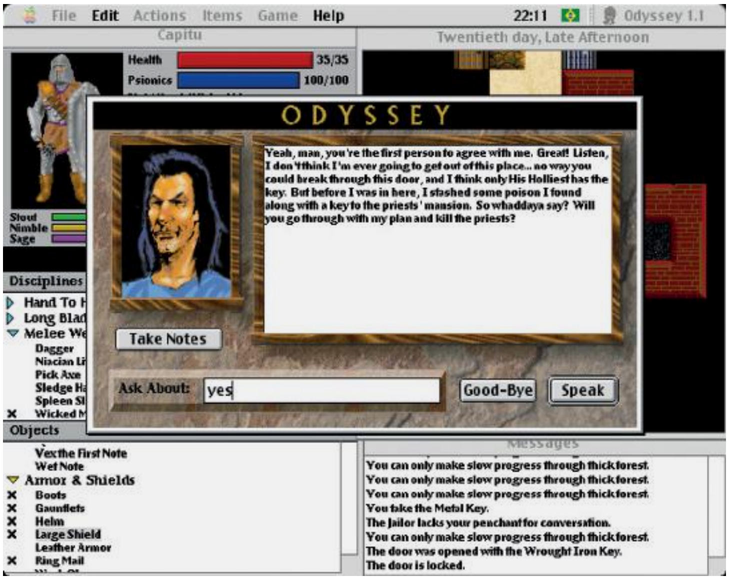
Obviously these are serious topics, and the game does visit dark places. But it also has a sense of humour, with some of the scenarios feeling downright satirical. For instance, there are the three identical towns of Billsville, where individuality is outlawed and society is designed to prevent it from emerging. Everyone is named Bill and dresses identically, for example, and people shift jobs every day to prevent anyone from getting too good, as a career may accidentally make you become someone.

There are definitely political overtones in several of these scenarios, but *Odyssey*'s primary developer, Richard Rouse III, says he didn't intend to make commentary. He just wanted to place players in interesting, real world-inspired situations they may have never been in before, and ask questions rather than give answers.

Despite this, I definitely felt his voice in the game. For example, the island of McTeague explores the apices of both capitalism and communism, and though I very much doubt he agrees with the far-left extremist on the island, the sheer ridiculousness of the capitalist character felt like his honest take on the system. But then again, maybe I'm projecting?

Mechanically, *Odyssey* is a very streamlined RPG. There are no classes, and though NPCs can join in battles and may occasionally follow the player, there is no party system. Combat is also quite simple, coming down to using the right items for each situation, and making sure you find strong equipment and level up.

> "As embarrassing as it is to admit, for me one big advantage to being on the Mac was that the majority of games were technologically behind their PC counterparts. This made *Odyssey*, with its somewhat dated technology, still acceptable as a commercial game in the Mac gaming market. It is certainly doubtful *Odyssey* would have made it onto store shelves as a PC title. The lower barrier to entry in the Mac gaming market made my own entry possible."
>
> *– Richard Rouse III,*
> Odyssey: The Legend of Nemesis*' Designer*


File Edit Actions Items Game Help
22:11
Odyssey 1.1
Capitu
Twentieth day, Late Afternoon
Health 35/35
Psionics 100/100
ODYSSEY
Stout
Nimble
Sage
Disciplines
Hand To H
Long Blad
Melee We
Dagger
Niacian Li
Pick Axe
Sledge Ha
Spleen Sl
Wicked M
Take Notes
Ask About: yes
Good-Bye
Speak
Objects
Vex the First Note
Wet Note
Armor & Shields
Boots
Gauntlets
Helm
Large Shield
Leather Armor
Ring Mail
Messages

Yeah, man, you're the first person to agree with me. Great! Listen, I don't think I'm ever going to get out of this place... no way you could break through this door, and I think only His Holliest has the key. But before I was in here, I stashed some poison I found along with a key to the priests' mansion. So whaddaya say? Will you go through with my plan and kill the priests?

You can only make slow progress through thick forest.
You can only make slow progress through thick forest.
You can only make slow progress through thick forest.
You take the Metal Key.
The Jailor lacks your penchant for conversation.
You can only make slow progress through thick forest.
The door was opened with the Wrought Iron Key.
The door is locked.

The dialogue system is based on typing keywords, as in *Ultima,* with some quests offering multiple solutions; to track things, you can manually take notes, copying entire dialogues to an in-game journal

Speaking of levelling, the system in *Odyssey* is streamlined to the point where some may consider it flawed: one of the primary ways to gain a level is to increase one's mastery of a discipline, but the cap for each is fairly low, forcing players to master as many as they can, even if they are ill equipped to do so.

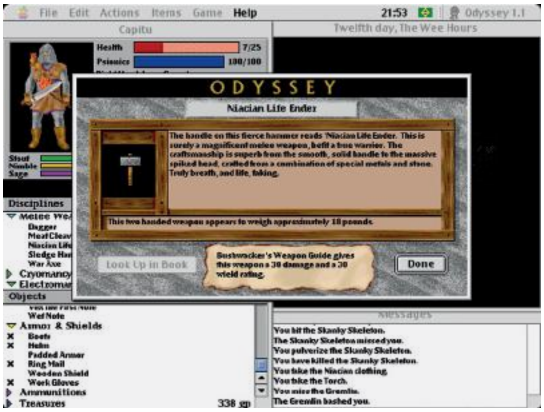
On the technical side, *Odyssey* uses the engine Bungie used for 1992's *Minotaur: The Labyrinths of Crete,* though it's not at all recognisable. *Minotaur* was a simple dungeon crawler designed to be played with people over a network, whereas *Odyssey* is a fully-fledged single-player RPG with a day-night cycle, a keyword conversation system, non-linear exploration, and NPCs with their own schedules.

Rouse remains in the game industry today, with his most recent work as of 2021 being a cult-infiltration game called *The Church in the Darkness* (2016), and his best-known being *The Suffering* games.

Despite it being his first commercial game, *Odyssey: The Legend of Nemesis* is still very much worth playing today. This is especially true if you're a fan of *Ultima*, which was a primary influence, and if hacking and slashing aren't your main attractions to an RPG. In fact, one island can be completed with barely any combat, possibly even with none at all.

This is because, at the time, Rouse was more interested in exploring the narrative side of things than the mechanical, and he even admits it's almost more of an adventure game than an RPG.

The focus is definitely on exploring each island, talking to the inhabitants, and solving problems … or, if you're so inclined, perhaps even exacerbating the unusual, sometimes surreal situations you find yourself in. Best of all, the game is now freeware, making it easier than ever to visit the islands of *Odyssey*, and face the challenges put forth by Nemesis. **AGR**


File Edit Actions Items Game Help
21:53
Odyssey 1.1
Capitu
Twelfth day, The Wee Hours
Health 7/25
Psionics 100/100
ODYSSEY
Niacian Life Ender
Stout
Nimble
Sage
Disciplines
Melee We
Dagger
Meat Clea
Niacian Lif
Sledge Ha
War Axe
Cryomancy
Electroma
Objects
Wet Note
Armor & Shields
Boots
Helm
Padded Armor
Ring Mail
Wooden Shield
Work Gloves
Ammunitions
Treasures
338 gp
Look Up in Book
Done
Messages

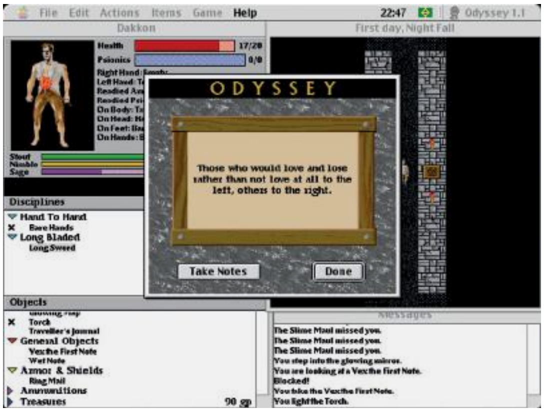
The handle on this fierce hammer reads 'Niacian Life Ender.' This is surely a magnificent melee weapon, befit a true warrior. The craftsmanship is superb from the smooth, solid handle to the massive spiked head, crafted from a combination of special metals and stone. Truly breath, and life, taking.

This two handed weapon appears to weigh approximately 18 pounds.

Bushwacker's Weapon Guide gives this weapon a 30 damage and a 30 wield rating.

You hit the Skanky Skeleton.
The Skanky Skeleton missed you.
You pulverize the Skanky Skeleton.
You have killed the Skanky Skeleton.
You take the Niacian clothing.
You take the Torch.
You miss the Gremlin.
The Gremlin bashed you.

The equipment system is simple but has some nice touches, like needing to own a weapon guide to fully identify weapons

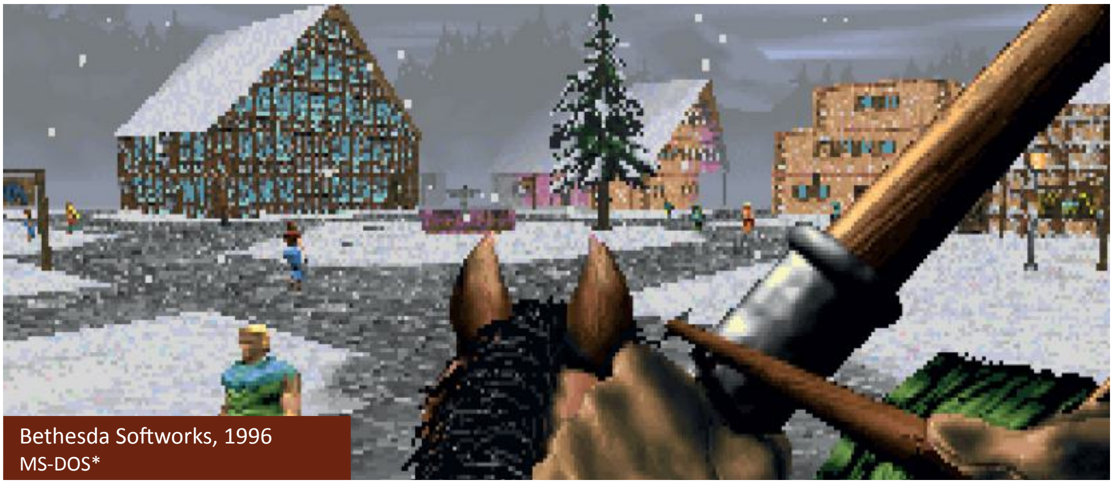

File Edit Actions Items Game Help
22:47
Odyssey 1.1
Dakkon
First day, Night Fall
Health 17/20
Psionics 0/0
Right Hand:
Left Hand:
Readied Ar
Readied Psi
On Body:
On Head:
On Feet:
On Hands:
ODYSSEY
Stout
Nimble
Sage
Disciplines
Hand To Hand
Bare Hands
Long Bladed
Long Sword
Take Notes
Done
Objects
Torch
Traveller's Journal
General Objects
Vex the First Note
Wet Note
Armor & Shields
Ring Mail
Ammunitions
Treasures
90 gp
Messages

Those who would love and lose rather than not love at all to the left, others to the right.

The Slime Maul missed you.
The Slime Maul missed you.
The Slime Maul missed you.
You step into the glowing mirror.
You are looking at a Vex the First Note.
Blocked!
You take the Vex the First Note.
You light the Torch.

Odyssey is a game more interested in asking questions than in giving answers, such as this *Ultima*-like personality test

The Elder Scrolls II: Daggerfall



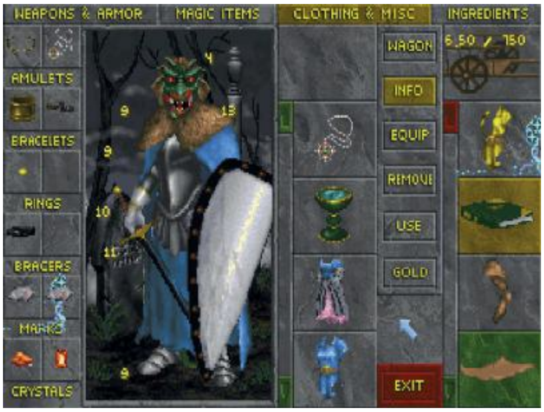
Bethesda Softworks, 1996
MS-DOS*

Envisioned as a game where you can do anything and never run out of quests and dungeons, *Daggerfall* was the most ambitious sandbox game ever conceived. Such projects often end up as horrible disasters (vide *Battlecruiser 3000AD*), but somehow Bethesda Softworks managed to pull it off, even though the effort and dedication to this worthy cause nearly bankrupted it, leading to its acquisition by ZeniMax and a re-examination of priorities.

Since 2009, Bethesda has made *Daggerfall* freely available for download on their website, as a celebration of the 15th anniversary of *The Elder Scrolls* series.

Procedurally generated, *Daggerfall* features a truly humongous world with over 15,000 towns and dungeons, over 750,000 characters, and a large number of guilds, temples, knightly and Templar orders, witch covens, vampire bloodlines, werewolves, and even wereboars (each with their own quests), all tied together by a handcrafted non-linear main quest with six different endings.

The game has a very detailed character system and a robust skillset, supporting different ways to handle obstacles and survive (climbing vs. levitating, medicine/swimming vs. casting spells, raw damage vs. backstab and critical strike, etc.).



Besides the multiple armour parts and accessories, *Daggerfall* also offers hundreds of clothing pieces, so that you can properly role-play your Argonian vampire noble

Even the character generator is overwhelmingly complex by today's standards, allowing you to create unique characters with different advantages and disadvantages (weakness in holy places, rapid healing in the darkness, forbidden armour type, immunity to magic, affinity with certain weapons, phobias, etc.).

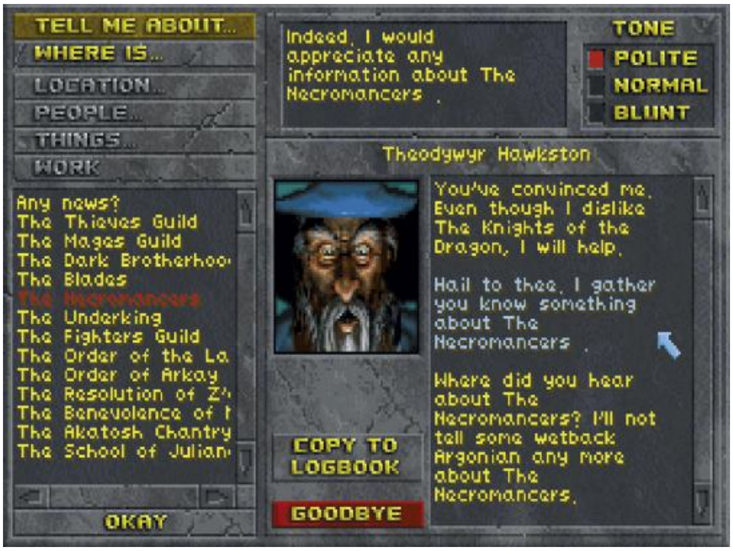
Your level-up speed is tied to these strengths and weaknesses, so you can make a juggernaut of destruction who levels up very, very slowly, a sickly warrior allergic to sunlight and physical activity who levels up twice as fast, or any other combination of traits and curses – though some can play horribly.

Daggerfall did a lot of interesting things, but if I had to pick the best, it would be the dungeons: it made you fear them. In most games a dungeon is a short hallway with some rooms; if you're lucky, there is a lower level with another hallway. Not in *Daggerfall*. You go into a dungeon, you don't know when or IF you're coming back. You don't know if your weapons will last, if you have enough supplies, if you're prepared to deal with whatever you'll find there. Emerging from a dungeon alive is an accomplishment, and I can't think of another game that managed to pull that off. Certainly not *Skyrim*, where, en route to a quest dungeon, you run into 3–4 lesser dungeons and clear them out while you're in the area.

The dungeons' design is fantastic and skill-based – walls and air shafts to climb, open areas to levitate up, pits to jump over, flooded areas to dive into, hidden areas and doors, multiple routes, switches, elevators, teleporters and so on.

Basically, Bethesda put together a very detailed character system and built a procedurally-generated world around it, as opposed to putting together a pretty game and throwing in some skills for the player's amusement.

> "I think it's pretty astonishing how many things actually did make it into *Daggerfall*. I mean, don't forget that turning into a vampire and a werewolf and buying boats and property and all that stuff were essentially Easter eggs in the game. We didn't mention any of that in the manual or in previews. They were just things to reward the player if he kept on playing."
>
> *– Ted Peterson,*
> Daggerfall*'s lead designer*


TELL ME ABOUT...
WHERE IS...
LOCATION...
PEOPLE...
THINGS...
WORK
Any news?
The Thieves Guild
The Mages Guild
The Dark Brotherhoo
The Blades
The Necromancers
The Underking
The Fighters Guild
The Order of the La
The Order of Arkay
The Resolution of Z
The Benevolence of
The Akatosh Chantry
The School of Julian
OKAY
TONE
POLITE
NORMAL
BLUNT
COPY TO LOGBOOK
GOODBYE

Indeed, I would appreciate any information about The Necromancers .

Theodywyr Hawkston

You've convinced me. Even though I dislike The Knights of the Dragon, I will help.

Hail to thee, I gather you know something about The Necromancers .

Where did you hear about The Necromancers? I'll not tell some wetback Argonian any more about The Necromancers.

The dialogue system allows you to ask anyone about several topics using three different tones; NPCs also react to your reputation, level, guild and race

The random quests deserve a special mention as well. They were well-written and did a great job supporting different characters and role-playing. For example, a priest might ask you to protect his temple against thieves coming to rob it, or to travel to some village and cast an elaborate healing spell on a sick person or investigate divine manifestations. While not very complex, such quests are infinitely more engaging than "kill five wolves".

In addition, *Daggerfall* had a superb atmosphere (just go out at night to enjoy delightful MIDI music, occasionally interrupted by the slain king's ghost screaming, "Vengeaaaance!"), tons of spells, a detailed spell-making and enchantment system with advantages and disadvantages, horses to ride, carriages to haul all that loot after a busy week in a dungeon, houses and ships to buy, lycanthropy, vampirism, banking, Daedra princes to summon in exchange for legendary artefacts, a truckload of monsters, etc.

Despite its flaws (mainly, bugs and the inevitably repetitive nature of procedurally-generated games), *Daggerfall* remains an impressive achievement in game design and complexity, standing next to the other notable and unsurpassed games of that era, like *Darklands, Ultima Underworld* and *Realms of Arkania*.

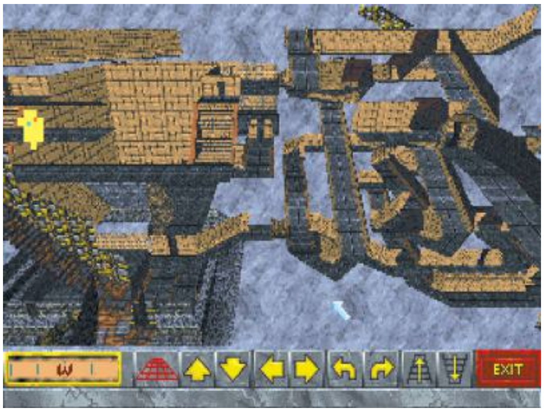
Considering that a game of such depth and complexity will never be made again, I'd suggest you grab DOSBox and see what games were like in the olden days when giants were upon the earth. **VD**

Useful Files and Mods:

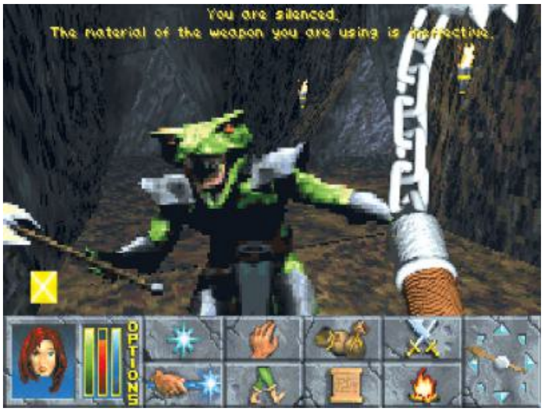
DaggerfallSetup: Installs the game, applies patches and fan-made quest packs and increases the game's draw distance. Highly recommended for a classic playthrough.

D.R.E.A.M.: A massive mod for Daggerfall Unity that updates the game's visuals, adding over 12GB of new textures, visual effects and upscaled NPC sprites.

***Daggerfall Unity* is a full port of the game into a new engine, allowing for better graphics, new features and greater mod support. The project reached beta status in 2020, and is now the best way to experience the game.**



Even with the 3D map, finding your way out of a massive dungeon can be a nightmare; a teleport spell sure helps

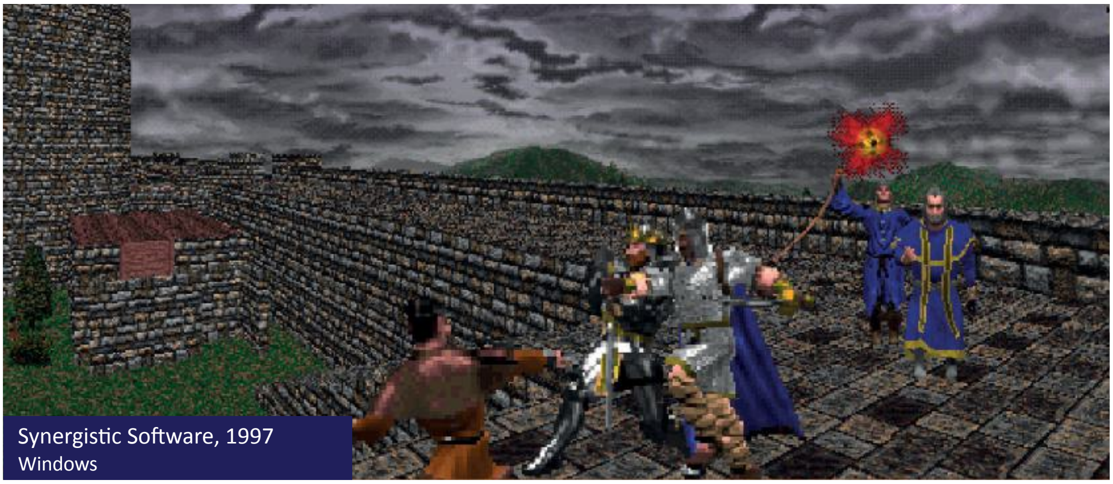


You are silenced.

The material of the weapon you are using is ineffective.

Be prepared: some enemies have spells and resistances that can single-handedly neutralise your tactics

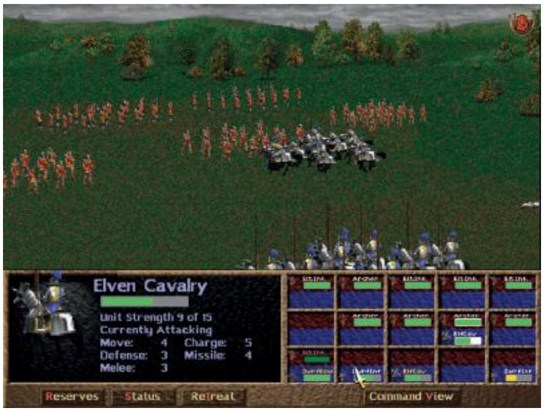
Birthright:
The Gorgon's Alliance


Synergistic Software, 1997
Windows

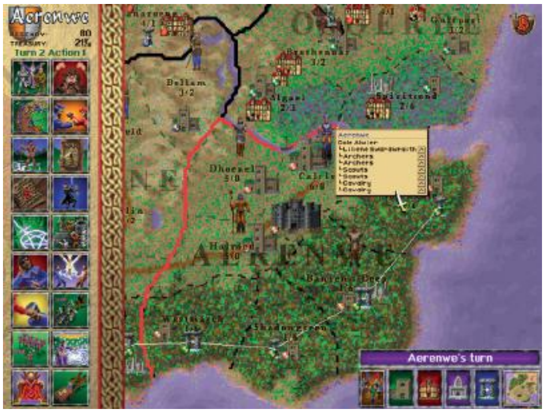
B*irthright: The Gorgon's Alliance* is an ambitious hybrid game based on the obscure *Birthright AD&D* campaign setting. The game consists of three distinct segments: the main strategy map, where you control your kingdom, real-time battles between armies, and a dungeon-crawling "adventure mode".

While marketing focused on the battles and RPG elements, those were by far the most disappointing aspects of *Birthright* and doomed it to being forgotten.

The *Birthright* campaign setting was released in 1995, designed by Rich Baker and Colin McComb. It was built around the concept of bloodlines having divine powers that help heroes to rule kingdoms.


Elven Cavalry
Unit Strength 9 of 15
Currently Attacking
Move: 4 Charge: 5
Defense: 3 Missile: 4
Melee: 3

The army battles are very limited – even Wizards and Clerics don't do much besides casting damage spells



The strategy segment is the saving grace of *Birthright*: you can choose to play with all the complex rules and features or in an easier, lite version

The biggest and most important part of the game is the grand strategy map, where you'll choose one of 18 available kingdoms and lead it to victory against the Gorgon invasion. This part is actually very well done and complex, as you get various options such as building fortifications, casting global magic, building trade routes and conducting espionage, allowing the player to choose his own playstyle.

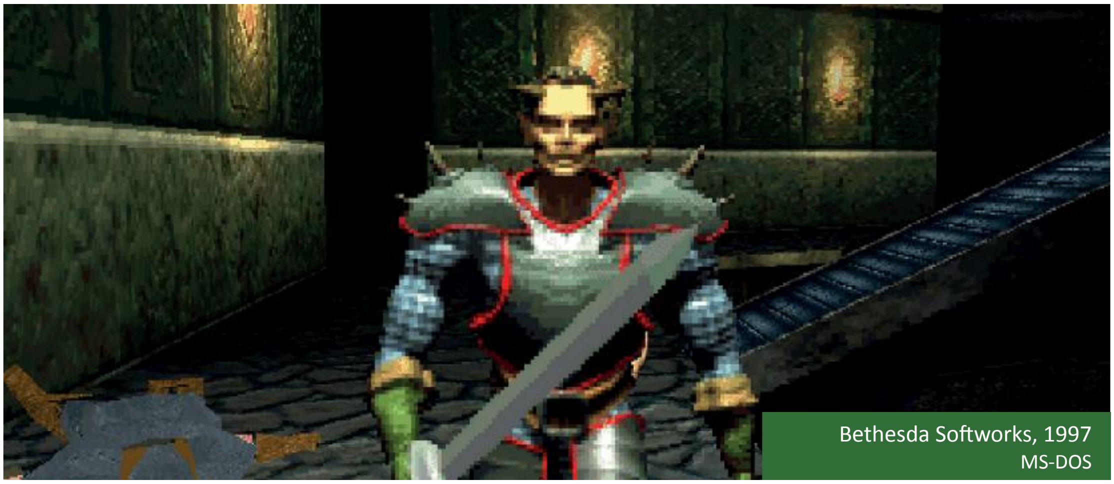
When armies clash, you go to the rather limited battle segment. You can field only a small part of your army, leaving the rest in reserve to replace damaged units. And both sides can only move units in a small 5 × 3 grid, which leaves little room for any real tactics.

In the adventure segments, your regent and his lieutenants go delving in dungeons after relics in a 3D first-person blobber. Mechanically this part is rather shallow – despite using the *AD&D* ruleset, you are limited to premade heroes and can't customise them much. The combat itself can be played in either real-time or turn-based mode, but both are poorly done. They are also confusing, thanks to a "cinematic" camera that pans out to show the characters fighting, which often results in said camera getting stuck. The redeeming part is the level design, as the maps are filled with secrets that are quite rewarding to find.

Birthright also offers multiple paths to victory, tough conquest, diplomacy, economy, magic and/or acquiring relics. Everything you and other regents do generates victory points and every few turns the game shows the progress of all factions.

It's easy to see why this game was both a commercial and a critical failure – the adventures are frustrating, battles are underwhelming and the strategy part is overwhelming. As such, those looking for an RPG should stay away, but strategy fans might find *Birthright* worth playing. **MV**

An Elder Scrolls Legend: Battlespire



Bethesda Softworks, 1997
MS-DOS

The Battlespire is a training centre for aspiring Imperial Battlemages, built into a secret corner of the Daedric realm of Oblivion. When you enter the premises to take your final test, you discover that the academy has been taken over by Daedric invaders! Now a seal blocks the portal you entered by; it looks like your only way out of this nightmare is through battle.

Originally planned as an add-on to *Daggerfall*, *Battlespire* was published as a stand-alone game. All the action takes place in the seven levels of the Battlespire and the regions of Oblivion intertwined with it. The character and class creation system is classic *Elder Scrolls*, even if only six player races made the cut. Also missing are the rest function, gold and shops. But it's not as if sleep was a good idea, anyway, with all those Daedric minions breathing down your neck. And if you need more equipment, find it on–site or take it off dead bodies. By the way, loot is the only randomised element in *Battlespire*. Unlike those for the *Daggerfall* dungeons, the complex maps here are entirely handcrafted, so you won't end up starving in a misbuilt labyrinth.

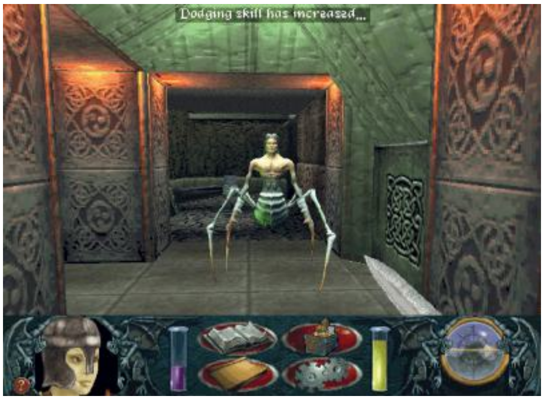
No, you'll pretty likely die in combat instead.

Enemies in the Battlespire are a lot tougher than those you encountered in *Daggerfall*. You need to outmanoeuvre hostiles if you want to survive. Now, don't get me wrong: *Battlespire* may be more action-oriented and linear than *Daggerfall*, but it's not all about bloodshed. You'll have plenty of opportunity to get to know the invaders and make allies. Yes, you read that right: allies. Not all Daedra are evil, nor does everyone agree with Mehrunes Dagon's plans for conquest. While you can get quite far by being impolite or just resorting to violence, you would be a fool to not take advantage of all the political intrigue going on.

Furthermore, *Battlespire* adds to and draws on established *Elder Scrolls* lore. Enjoyed *Oblivion* and want to learn more about the Daedric realm, Mehrunes Dagon and his infighting court? Play *Battlespire*!

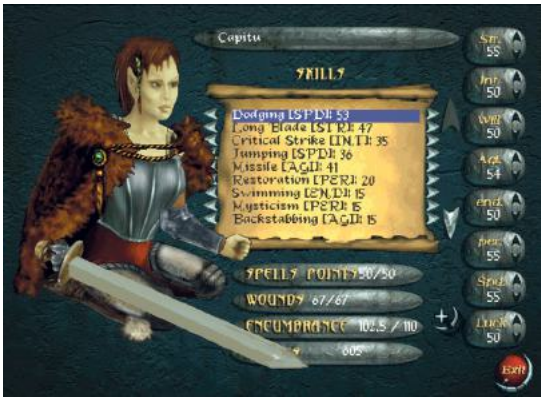
My only gripe are the bugs. While it's not the bugfest *Daggerfall* was, some might force you to start levels all over again, so be sure to patch it. But don't you dare ignore this fun and demanding game just because of this. The scheming, the voice acting and the dialogue options are too brilliant to miss out on. **NS**

After *Battlespire,* Bethesda released another spin-off, *The Elder Scrolls Adventures: Redguard,* a 3D action-adventure game. Warmly received, the game's most memorable feature was its black protagonist.



Dodging skill has increased...

Combat is similar to that in *Daggerfall*, with mouse movement controlling the weapons' attacks



Capitu

SKILLS

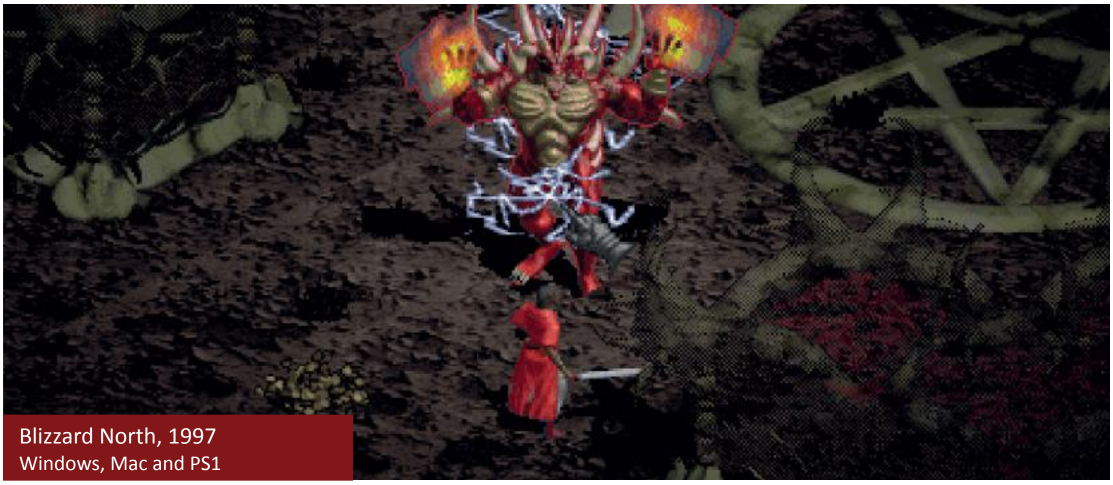
Dodging [SPD]: 53
Long Blade [STR]: 47
Critical Strike [INT]: 35
Jumping [SPD]: 36
Missile [AGI]: 41
Restoration [PER]: 20
Swimming [END]: 15
Mysticism [PER]: 15
Backstabbing [AGI]: 15

SPELLS POINTS 50/50
WOUNDS 67/67
ENCUMBRANCE 102.5 / 110
605

Str 55
Int 50
Wil 50
Agl 54
End 50
Per 55
Spd 55
Luck 50

You can pick a pre-made class or create your own, customising stats, advantages and disadvantages, as well as buying your starting equipment, items and spells

Diablo

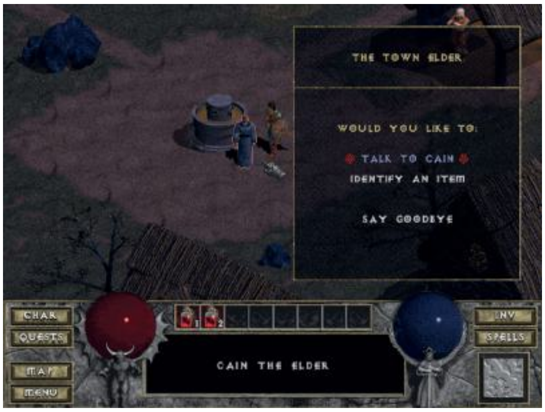

Blizzard North, 1997
Windows, Mac and PS1

The history of *Diablo* is explored in the *Stay Awhile and Listen* book, published in 2013 by David L. Craddock.

"Ahh, fresh meat." Those now immortal words spoken by *Diablo*'s infamous first real antagonist, the Butcher, foreshadow what is to come. *Diablo* and its sequels are like a butcher's meat grinder. A haunting experience in which players find themselves faced with a never-ending onslaught of ungodly creatures. Your journey concludes by facing down the ultimate evil himself: Diablo.

A player's journey in *Diablo* starts off with the choosing of a character class and a name. Each class has attributes pre-allocated and a special skill. The Warrior specialises in melee weaponry and repair. Archery and trap-disarming are handled by the Rogue. Finally, the Sorcerer specialises in powerful spells and the ability to charge magical staves.

Further abilities, however, are not locked into your class selection – new skills and spells are acquired by finding or buying arcane tomes and can be learned by any class, as long as they have the required attributes. Classes also have assigned speeds of attack, casting, and blocking. Great depth in customisation wouldn't come until *Diablo II*.



"Stay a while and listen" says Deckard Cain, one of the most recognised NPCs in gaming: he'll tell you tales and identify items, but will charge you for it

Diablo excels at world-building. Tristram is a quaint little gothic town whose church sits on top of a mysterious labyrinth. Each new game has a randomly generated dungeon where the adventure takes place.

But your first experience isn't killing monsters or grabbing items. It's the serene sounds of one of the single best tracks in gaming history. Strong voice acting and nuanced dialogue introduce you to the world in *Diablo*. Each of Tristram's characters tells a part of the story through quality voiced dialogue in addition to their gameplay functions.

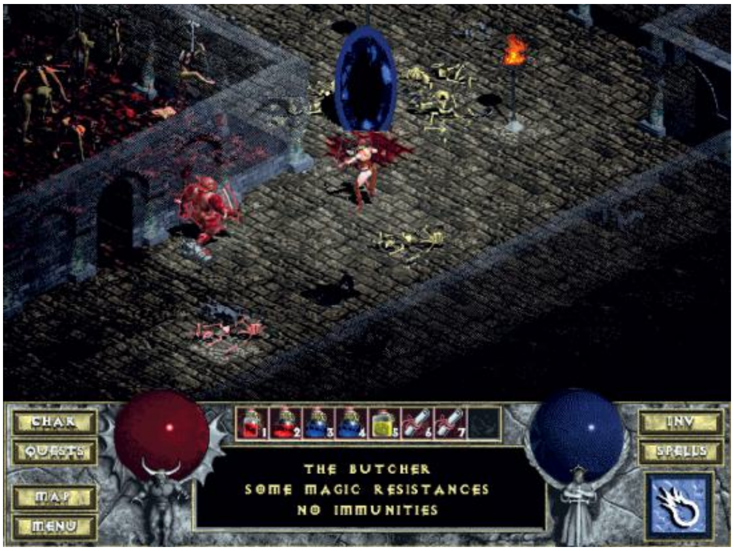
The cast of characters, music and gothic-styled art of the town create an atmosphere in which the player always wants to learn more. As you delve deeper into the dungeon, you'll find books detailing past events such as the possession of the prince, the King's subsequent madness, or containing unique quests. The plot itself fails to live up to such great world-building, as your mission is laser-focused on ridding the town of evil and defeating Diablo.

Diablo's core gameplay is built on an addictive foundation of killing monsters, levelling up, finding items, and doing this over and over again. This gameplay loop became so popular that it spawned an entire sub-genre known as "*Diablo* clones".

Killing monsters is simple. Left-click to attack, right-click to use spells, and press the numbered keys to consume potions in the hot bar. Monsters come in various shapes and forms – including colour palette swaps – and occasionally you'll also encounter unique fiends that come with special abilities and resistances.

Experience gained from killing these monsters eventually leads to a level-up whereby you can allocate five points to Strength, Dexterity, Vitality or Magic. Each of these affects derived statistics like damage, chance to hit, life, and mana.

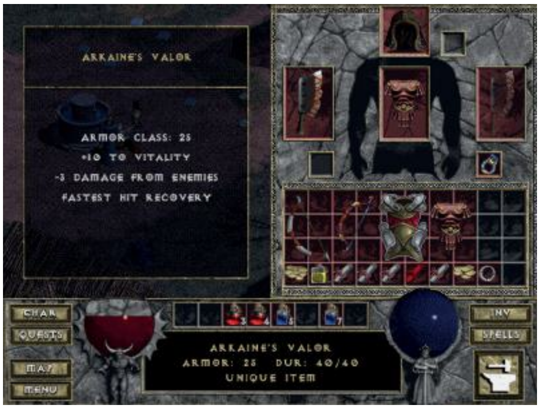
> “Originally, *Diablo* was a turn-based game. It was largely modelled around a Roguelike game called *Angband*. […] A bit into the development, the idea of turning *Diablo* into a real-time game started whispering around the office.
> I resisted for a while, but eventually I decided to give it a try, and I remember it like it was yesterday.
> I spent the day converting the code to real-time, and the first time I pressed the mouse button, the warrior walked over and smashed a skeleton apart in a smooth and satisfying motion.”
>
> *– David Brevik,*
> Diablo*’s lead programmer*



The Rogue faces the macabre Butcher, one of *Diablo*’s unique boss enemies; his room is covered in blood, full of mutilated corpses that didn’t exactly please parents

What makes this loop fun is the item system. Each item you find will be randomly generated from a preset pool of qualities. Regular items have no special properties; just a damage or armour rating. Magical items combine a prefix and suffix attribute which provides various bonuses to your character. It could be faster attack speed, additional character stats, or even curses. And Unique items are extremely rare and powerful. *Diablo* captures players with the constant promise of a better item just around the corner, maybe in the next chest or enemy, driving you to keep fighting monsters till the early hours of the morning.

Together with *Diablo*, Blizzard also launched the Battle.net service, where you could play competitively or cooperatively online. The big downside was the rampant cheating, as Blizzard did not police hacks and exploits much. This alienated some from online play, so the company was much fiercer in enforcing anti-cheating measures on future titles.



The small, grid-based inventory forces players to go back to town frequently for a brief moment of respite

In 1997, *Diablo* got an expansion called *Hellfire*. It brought some welcome convenience features like the ability to move faster in town. Oddly, *Hellfire* was not developed by the same team or even company, so it lacks the same consistent quality as the base game. Still, extra content in the way of a new Monk class, item upgrades and quests make *Hellfire* worthwhile for *Diablo* veterans, and some features would eventually work their way into *Diablo II*.

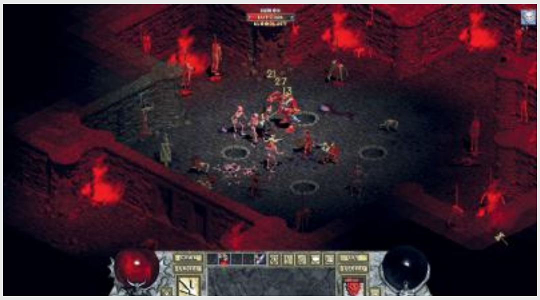
Not many RPGs succeed in minimalism like *Diablo*. The game world is not to be missed and the seminal loot system provides limitless replay value. There’s always another item to find, another monster to kill and a new gothic labyrinth to navigate. **SD**

Mods:

Belzebub: a.k.a. *Diablo HD*, this adds widescreen support and extensive gameplay changes, such as rebalanced classes and features from *Diablo II*.

Diablo Awake: Adds new monsters/bosses, spells, quests and items, plus bug fixes and gameplay tweaks.

The Hell: Claiming to be the hardest of all *Diablo* mods, it adds new classes, items and over 500 named monsters.

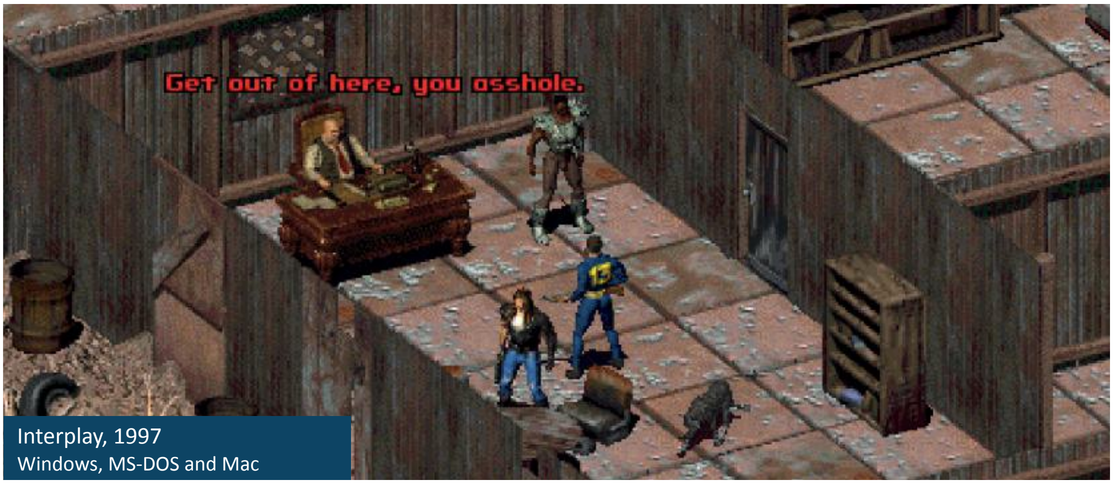


The *Belzebub* mod also adds content that was cut from the game, such as the Butcher’s Chambers

The *Hellfire* expansion added the Monk class, but the disk also contained two unfinished classes – the Barbarian and the Bard. Both can be played by editing the game’s files.

Fallout:

A Post-Nuclear Role-Playing Game



Interplay, 1997
Windows, MS-DOS and Mac

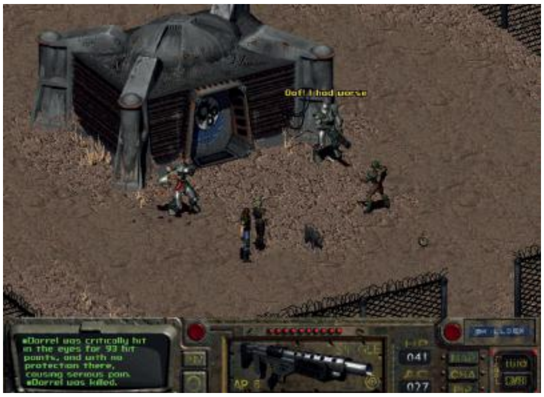
***Fallout* had a very rough development, filled with cancellation threats and a lot of work being done by developers in their spare time. After *Diablo*'s success they were heavily pressured to turn the game into a real-time multiplayer RPG.**

It's very difficult to convey just how important the first *Fallout* was to CRPGs. Not only because now most people associate the series with Bethesda's open-world games, but mainly because its influence is so widespread that it became almost invisible.

The JRPG, RTS and FPS genres were booming back in 1996, but computer RPGs were practically dead. *Daggerfall* had been the only big release of 1996. *Diablo* arrived in early 1997 to much acclaim, but the genre still felt stale and limited, especially when compared to JRPGs like 1995's *Chrono Trigger*. CRPGs were linear, combat-focused and usually very poorly written.

Fallout changed everything. A spiritual successor to *Wasteland* (1988), it presented a post-apocalyptic world with a retro-futuristic style based on the US of the '50s, sharply written with a dark, ironic optimism.

You play as a citizen of an underground vault, who must leave this sheltered life and venture into the radioactive wasteland in search of a Water Chip. *Fallout* offers a large, non-linear open world full of perils, but is not an RPG about raiding dungeons – most of your time will be spent in the few surviving towns, dealing with mankind's biggest foe: other men.



•Dorrel was critically hit in the eyes for 93 hit points, and with no protection there, causing serious pain.
•Dorrel was killed.

Combat is turn-based and uses action points, a simplified version of *X-COM*'s Time Units; the game allows you to aim shots at specific body parts of enemies to blind or cripple them

It must be said that *Fallout* excels at atmosphere and world-building. Everything follows a coherent internal logic; the soundtrack is foreboding; and the writers knew just how to build up tension. The way the Deathclaw is introduced – first in wild rumours, then slowly coming to the forefront – is outstanding.

However, what defines the game is the number (and quality) of role-playing options. *Fallout* wasn't the first RPG with choices, but it was the first entirely designed around them. The developer's goal was that every quest should be solvable in at least three ways: combat, dialogue or stealth. And they succeeded.

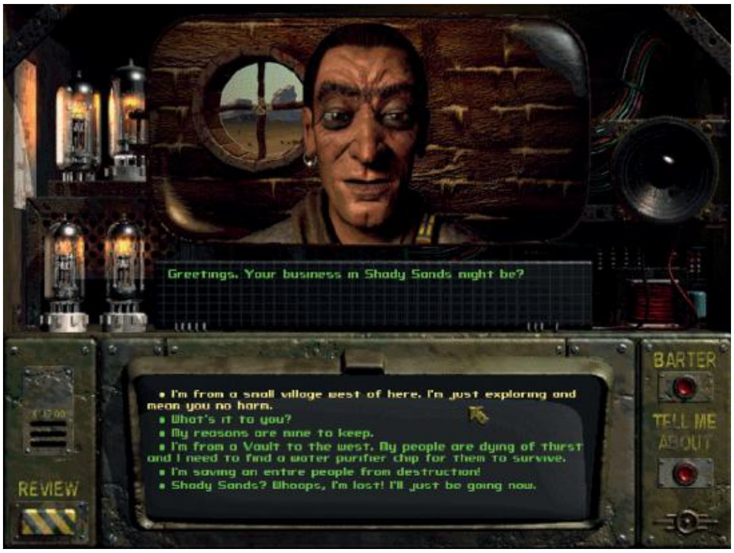
A simple side-quest such as Raiders kidnapping a girl has multiple approaches: you can kill everyone, talk them down or sneak in and lock-pick the girl's cell door. That would already be impressive even by modern standards, but *Fallout* goes further. You can also trade for the girl, blow her cell, ignore her and join the Raiders, challenge their leader to a fistfight, or even disguise yourself as their previous leader.

Every time you play you'll find new solutions. And the designers were not afraid of letting you skip content. When tasked with clearing a radscorpion nest inside a cave you can slowly kill them one by one or just blow up their cave's entrance instead.

Behind all this is the game's robust character system. *Fallout* was initially going to be based on GURPS, a popular and flexible tabletop RPG system, but the game's violence led to the licence's owner later refusing the deal. The designers then had to quickly create their own ruleset: the SPECIAL system.

Based on seven stats and 18 skills ranging from Small Weapons to Sneak, Repair and Speech, it offers an amazing range of role-playing options. This, combined with the multiple solutions to each quest, means you can truly play however you want.

> "*GURPS* was another huge influence on me. With its generic system that allowed any setting to be used, I could finally make up any adventure story and it would work. Science fiction stories set in space, superhero adventures, a psionic system that was balanced ... *GURPS* opened my eyes to the world of adventure beyond the realm of fantasy."
>
> *– Tim Cain,*
> *Producer, designer and*
> *lead programmer of* Fallout



Greetings. Your business in Shady Sands might be?

- I'm from a small village west of here. I'm just exploring and mean you no harm.
- What's it to you?
- My reasons are mine to keep.
- I'm from a Vault to the west. My people are dying of thirst and I need to find a water purifier chip for them to survive.
- I'm saving an entire people from destruction!
- Shady Sands? Whoops, I'm lost! I'll just be going now.

Depending on your stats, items and skills, new dialogue options may appear, but they aren't marked: you'll have to read everything and decide which answer is better

In *Fallout* it's perfectly possible to play a pacifist, talking your way out of conflicts and finishing the game without killing anyone – even the "big bad" is reasonable. Or you can do the exact opposite and kill everyone. Or how about playing as a character with intelligence so low that he can't even speak properly?

The game reacts to all that in meaningful ways, including the now-famous ending slides that show the consequences of your actions. Your first playthrough won't last more than 20 hours, as the game is short and has a time limit, but you can easily spend hundreds of hours replaying it to try new characters and paths.

Sadly, *Fallout* isn't perfect. Combat can be quite satisfying thanks to the excellent animations, fast UI and great sound design, but it also lacks depth and is quite unbalanced. NPCs have poor AI and you have no control over the companions you recruit, meaning they will constantly shoot you by accident.

The sequel, *Fallout 2* (1998), would improve on these and add much more content and polish, making it, for some fans, the best game of the series. However, the original game will always remain a concise and expertly crafted experience that should be played by every RPG fan. And then replayed, over and over.

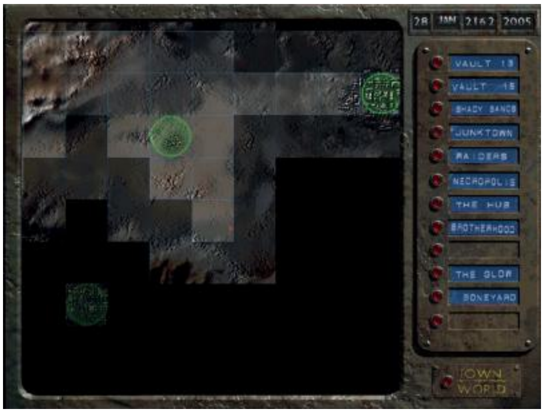
Fallout carved a new path for CRPGs, pushing the concept of "choice and consequence" deep into the modern rendition of the genre. But, to this day, very few games reached the impressive standards that *Fallout* set over 20 years ago. **FE**

Mods:

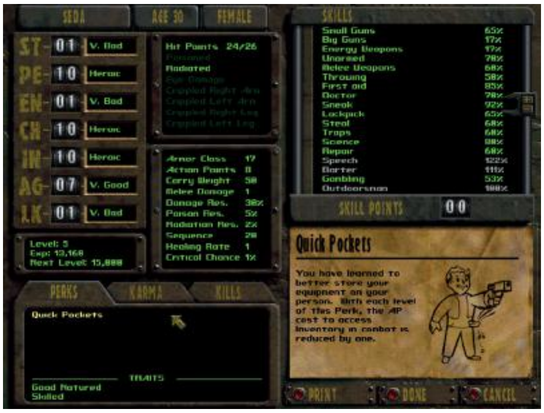
Fallout Fixt: A big pack of bug fixes and optional mods.

Fallout Et Tu: Converts the entire game to *Fallout 2*'s engine, fixing bugs while also adding many improvements and optional mods. Highly recommended.

The first release of *Fallout* had a time limit that changed with your actions. Due to negative feedback, the 1.1 patch greatly extended the limit, but the *Fallout Fixt* mod can revert it back to the original.



You'll travel across the wasteland through the world map, trying to uncover new areas and avoid random battles



SEDA AGE 30 FEMALE

ST 01 V. Bad
PE 10 Heroic
EN 01 V. Bad
CH 10 Heroic
IN 10 Heroic
AG 07 V. Good
LK 01 V. Bad

Level: 5
Exp: 13,168
Next Level: 15,000

Hit Points 24/26
Radiated

Armor Class 17
Action Points 8
Carry Weight 50
Melee Damage 1
Damage Res. 30%
Poison Res. 5%
Radiation Res. 2%
Sequence 20
Healing Rate 1
Critical Chance 1%

Small Guns 65%
Big Guns 17%
Energy Weapons 17%
Unarmed 78%
Melee Weapons 68%
Throwing 58%
First aid 85%
Doctor 78%
Sneak 92%
Lockpick 65%
Steal 68%
Traps 68%
Science 88%
Repair 68%
Speech 122%
Barter 111%
Gambling 53%
Outdoorsman 100%

SKILL POINTS 00

Quick Pockets

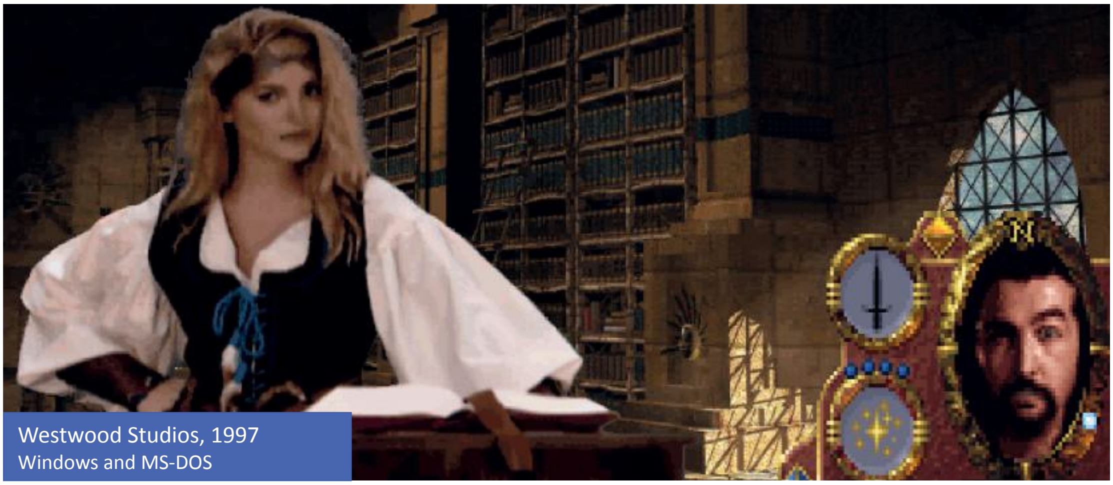
You have learned to better store your equipment on your person. With each level of this Perk, the AP cost to access inventory in combat is reduced by one.

Quick Pockets

TRAITS
Good Natured
Skilled

Fallout introduced ideas like choosing a Perk every few levels, which *D&D* 3rd Edition later mimicked with Feats

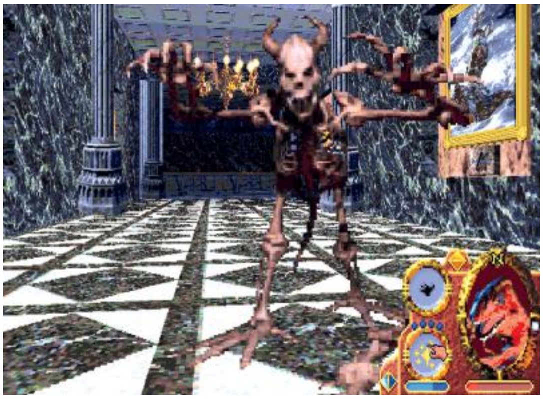
Lands of Lore II:
Guardians of Destiny



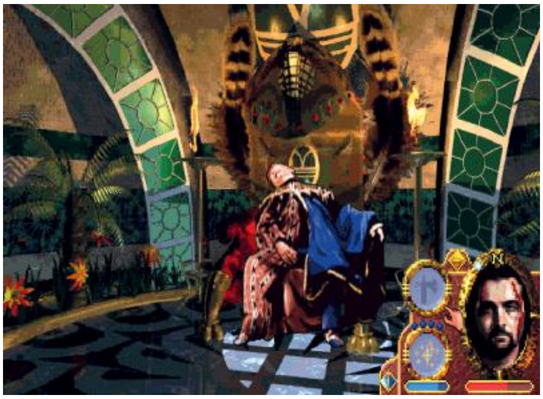
Westwood Studios, 1997
Windows and MS-DOS

Westwood Studios had a strong tradition in 2D art, creating some impressive artwork in *Eye of the Beholder* and *Lands of Lore*. But the 3D craze and the popularity of the FMV scenes in *Command & Conquer* clearly changed something, and so *Guardians of Destiny* came as a 3D title, with real actors, full voice acting and many pre-rendered cutscenes – enough to fill four CDs. Despite all this effort, time wouldn't be gentle and the game's graphics haven't aged as well as those of its predecessor.

Westwood Studios was sold to EA in 1998, and in 1999 they released *Lands of Lore III*. The worst game in the series, it was universally bashed for its outdated 3D graphics and bland gameplay.



Sometimes transformations will happen at the worst possible time, turning you into a small, fragile reptile right next to an angry skeleton



The game never explicitly tells you this, but it offers a few alternatives, such as killing the King and stealing his treasure, instead of trying to persuade him

Guardians of Destiny puts you in control of Luther, son of Scotia – the evil witch defeated in *Lands of Lore*. However, Luther isn't a villain in search of revenge, but rather a wisecracking reluctant hero, who must find a cure for the ancient curse he bears.

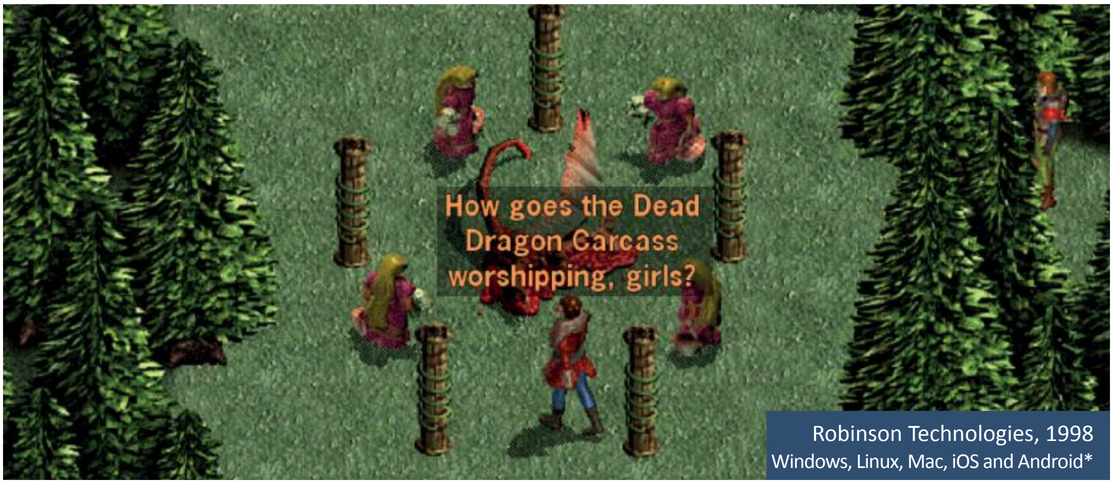
This curse causes Luther to randomly (yes, it might happen at any time) transform into a tiny lizard – that can pass through small openings and cast powerful spells – or into a huge beast, strong and able to move large objects. Apart from that, the gameplay is heavily streamlined. There are no party members, no classes to choose from, level-ups are automatic and the real-time combat usually boils down to clicking the Attack and Magic buttons as fast as possible.

Luckily, combat and stats aren't the focus of the game. *Guardians of Destiny* features a design that clearly favours exploration instead of combat, with its well-designed levels populated by just a few enemies. Instead of monsters, the areas in the game are filled with alternative paths, for each of your transformations, and secrets – not only a few hidden rooms and treasures, but entire levels, items, spells and even lore-related cutscenes that players might not see. There are also various interactions with the environment, such as stacking boxes to climb a ledge, igniting oil or destroying pillars to cause a cave-in.

Better yet, the game features two paths – a good and an evil one – each offering a few unique events and endings. There are no dialogue choices in-game; everything is made through direct interactions, such as killing NPCs or using/destroying key objects.

These fine details remind you that *Guardians of Destiny* was made by Westwood Studios, long-time veterans of the genre. While it may look cheesy, it's still a charming RPG, with a charismatic main character, great level design and many secrets to uncover. **FE**

Dink Smallwood


How goes the Dead Dragon Carcass worshipping, girls?

Robinson Technologies, 1998
Windows, Linux, Mac, iOS and Android*

A joyful blend of *Zelda* and *Monkey Island*, *Dink Smallwood* tells the story of a pig farmer still living with his mother, mocked by real adventurers and rejected by women. When evil strikes, is up to him take up arms and begin his own epic quest.

Of course, the game's claim to fame is the humour, and Dink delivers a constant barrage of odd quips, cruel jokes and passive-aggressive dialogues. I advise attacking everything in sight, just to see his reaction.

The gameplay is simple – you travel through map screens, talking to NPCs and battling monsters, eventually levelling up your three stats – Attack, Defence and Magic – and finding new weapons and spells.

Sadly, the game's progression is often halted by quest items sold in stores at insane prices, forcing players to spend hours killing monsters. This destroys the flow of an otherwise short and sweet game.

By itself, *Dink* would be little more than a curiosity. But the game came with friendly mod tools, and, in 1999, the developers made the game free, later releasing the source code as well. This led to the rise of a passionate community creating "D-mods" – new adventure modules for *Dink Smallwood*.

Mods:

Mystery Island: A sequel to *Dink Smallwood*, made by the original developers and included in the free version.

Pilgrim's Quest: A lengthy adventure, with several new regions, weapons, spells, riddles and even boat sailing.

Lyna's Story: With Dink gone and the King's knights missing, it's up to Lyna to venture out and save the day.

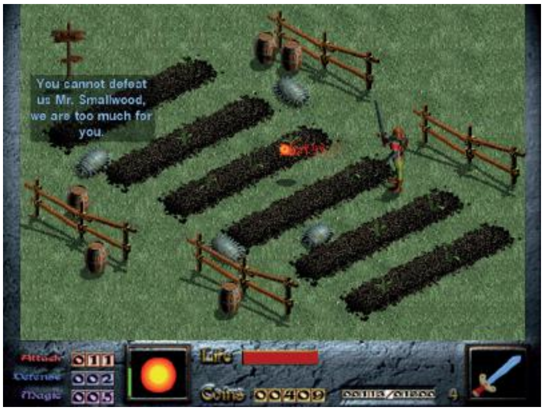
Dink Goes Boating: An excellent tutorial for the game's modding, it carefully explains how scripting works.

Mayhem: A short time-attack module where you're a Black Knight that must pillage a village and get out.

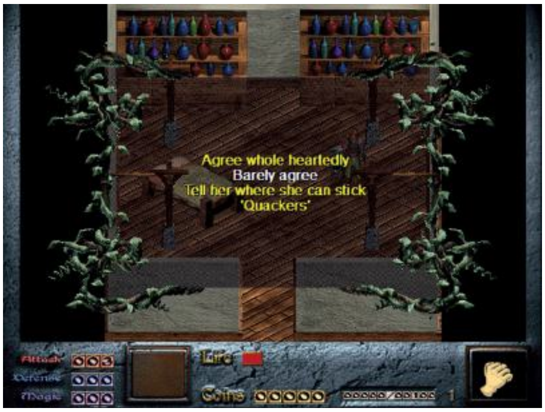
Still active today, the "Dinkers" have produced hundreds of D-mods, ranging from epic adventures to short romps, one-screen mini-games and even educative modules such as 2006's *Dink Goes Boating*, which teaches the game's scripting systems.

These modules have long since surpassed the base game and are more than enough reason to own *Dink Smallwood*. Just head to www.dinknetwork.com and choose your next adventure. **FE**

***Several versions of *Dink Smallwood* exist. The 2011 HD version has more features, but doesn't support all D-mods. You're best off with the FreeDink_ release, which runs perfectly on modern PCs.**


You cannot defeat us Mr. Smallwood, we are too much for you.

Combat is real-time and somewhat *Diablo*-like, with a melee attack and a magic spell, but it's very simple


Agree whole heartedly
Barely agree
Tell her where she can stick 'Quackers'

A great deal of *Dink*'s humour comes from the dialogue choices, full of dirty jokes and edgy teenager lines

Final Fantasy VII

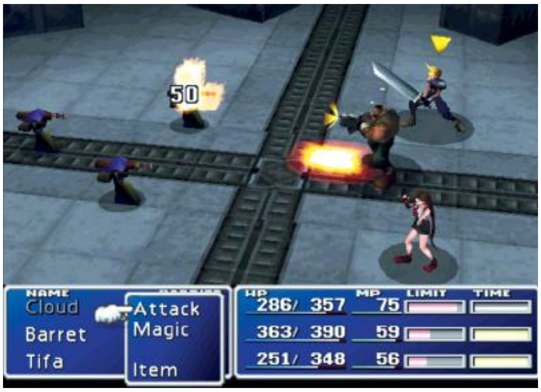
Squaresoft, 1997
Windows and PS1

***Final Fantasy VII* was one of the first JRPGs to be ported to Windows. It was released by Eidos in 1998 and became infamous for making odd changes, such as using low-quality MIDI music and adding mouths to the in-game models. Most of these were fixed in the 2012 re-release.**

Over twenty years after its original release, *Final Fantasy VII* remains the most popular entry in a very popular series. The game was a breakthrough hit and maintains a broad fan base even today. In its own time, it was the console RPG for people who didn't play console RPGs, much the same way that the novels of George R.R. Martin became the fantasy novels for people who don't read that genre. (Indeed, the game was so popular that Squaresoft later commissioned an extremely rare PC port, which explains its inclusion in this book.)

In short, *Final Fantasy VII* was a cultural phenomenon around the world, and Squaresoft (now Square Enix) has never enjoyed the same measure of cultural penetration since.

In a sense, *Final Fantasy VII* deserves its special reputation, because it is unique in many ways. These days, dramatic stories and high-res cutscenes are ubiquitous in mainstream games. Moreover, many of those games are preceded by multimillion-dollar marketing campaigns. But, in 1997, *FFVII* was a pioneer in both of those things, and few people had ever seen anything like it.



Combat follows the traditional *Final Fantasy* formula, called Active Time Battle; the big change was the 3D graphics, which were impressive at the time

FFVII also takes the sword-and-sorcery tropes for which RPGs were famous and replaces them with a futuristic dystopia. (It was hardly the first RPG to do this, but the console audience had yet to encounter games like *Fallout).* Gone are the wizards, knights and rogues of traditional RPGs. Instead, the player meets an aloof mercenary, an eco-terrorist, a bartender, a research specimen, an aviator, a vampire, a remote-controlled toy and the world's last ninja.

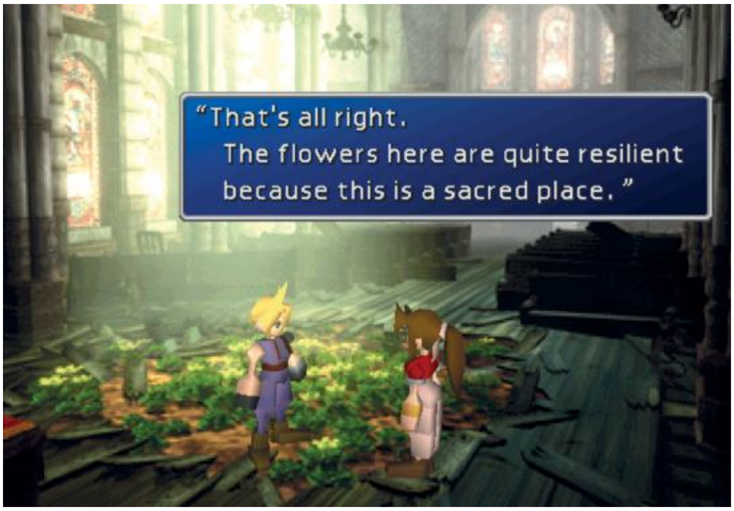
The player's party doesn't fight against an evil empire either, but rather against a globe-spanning corporation with its own private army. The world is well-rendered, highly detailed and deeply memorable. Years later, players of all tastes still find the gigantic metropolis of Midgar to be one of the most compelling settings they've encountered in a game.

In another sense, *FFVII* is not as remarkable as its reputation suggests, but instead is a direct continuation of trends which the series had been developing for years. Starting in *Final Fantasy V*, the series designers began to abate the role of traditional RPG job classes. This trend continues in *FFVII*, in which the statistical differences between characters are so small as to be imperceptible, except to master-level players. Only one character has a discernible job class – Aeris, who is clearly a white Mage – and her fate in the game can be taken as a kind of embedded critique of the meaningfulness of job classes in story-heavy RPGs.

But why does *Final Fantasy VII* get rid of character classes? By abandoning the tactical aspect of party composition, it allows the player to use whatever combination of characters he or she likes for story-related reasons. If the player thinks Cid is funny, that Red XIII is cute, or that Vincent is cool – well, they can bring those characters to any fight in the game!

"When a character in a video game dies, no one thinks it's that sad. They're just characters in a game, after all – you can just reset the game and try again, or you can always revive them somehow. I felt that their lives just didn't have much weight. With 'life' as our theme for *FFVII*, I thought we should try depicting a character who really dies for good, who can't come back. For that death to resonate, it needed to be an important character."

– Tetsuya Nomura,
FFVII*'s character director*



"That's all right.
The flowers here are quite resilient
because this is a sacred place."

While the character models during combat and cutscenes were somewhat realistic, outside combat you control simple, stylised characters over pre-rendered backgrounds

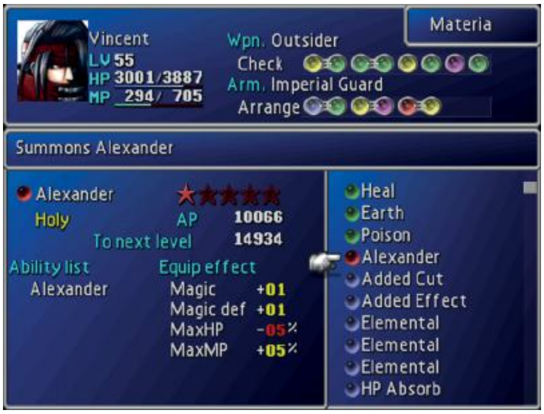
Tactical considerations always take a back seat, because storytelling was the primary concern of the developers. This is also the reason why the main quest is notoriously easy. Aside from two or three difficult bosses, the game presents few mandatory challenges. They did not want to alienate a core audience that was playing for the story and characters.

Like everything else in the game, *FFVII*'s story is remarkable in one sense, and in another sense it is completely normal for the series. As usual, an unlikely group of heroes bands together to save the world from a homicidal maniac. The real magic of the story is in how the characters react to their circumstances. Nearly all of the important characters in the game, including the antagonist, are survivors who have outlived the people, places and ideas that once defined them. The characters' maturely written internal struggles make the grandiose plot relevant to an audience that might otherwise have outgrown it.

Final Fantasy VII remains a fun game to play, as well. Although the main quest is easy and only replayable for its best story moments, the endgame is still quite engaging. To deliver a complex set of challenges without interfering with the story, most of the really interesting content is pushed towards the end of the game. All of *FFVII*'s most idiosyncratic features (like Chocobo breeding and complex Materia setups) only become available to the player after the 30-hour mark.

Overall, *Final Fantasy VII* is an excellent example of the subgenre retrospectively called the "JRPG". Enthusiasts of traditional PC or tabletop RPGs should be aware that linear storytelling is the primary concern, and the traditional moral and tactical choices are either omitted or relocated to places they might not be expected in. But, if we assess it in the context of what it aims to accomplish, *Final Fantasy VII* remains an artistic triumph. **PNH**

Several mods were made for the PC port, improving the graphics, UI and music quality, as well as increasing the difficulty. Tifa's Bootleg is a handy mod manager that lists the improvements available and allows you to choose which to install.

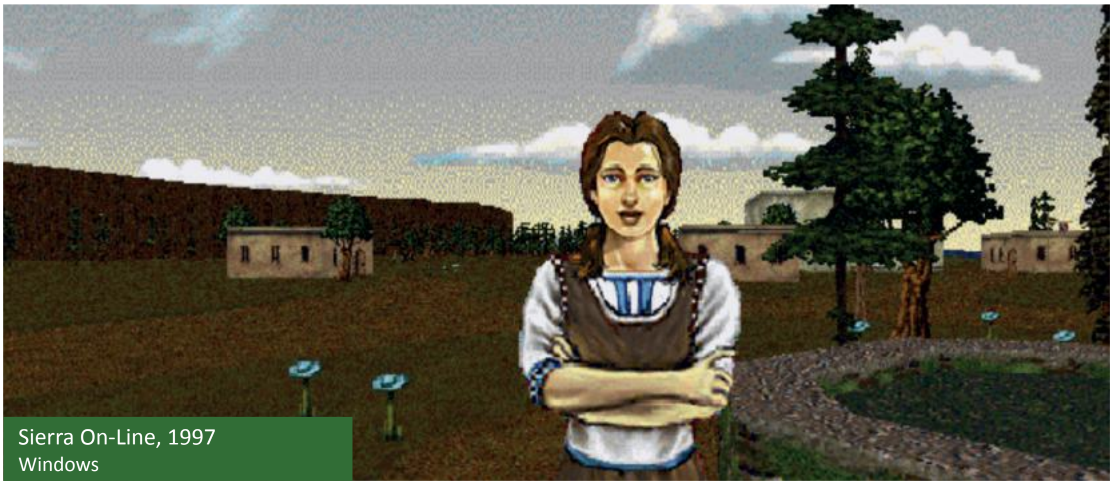


The character system is based on equipping Materia, which provides stat bonuses, skills, spells and summons

Hey, where is everyone?

Final Fantasy VII features over 40 minutes of pre-rendered cutscenes, something unheard of at the time

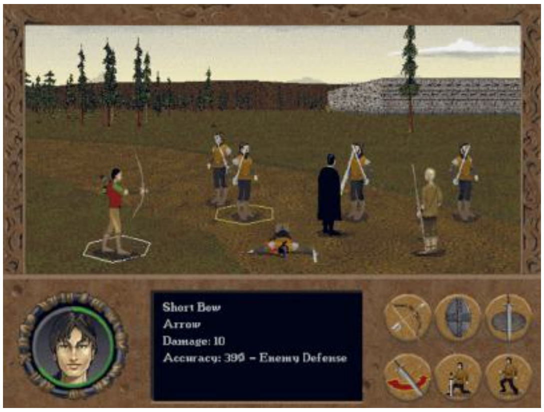
Betrayal in Antara



Sierra On-Line, 1997
Windows

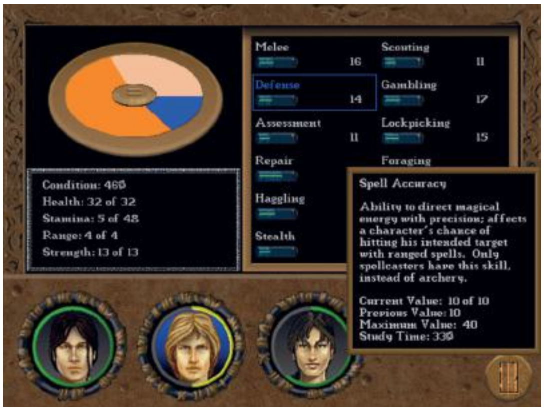
Initially released only on floppy disks, *Betrayal at Krondor* had rather disappointing sales, so Sierra cancelled their plans for a sequel and gave up on the licence to Raymond E. Feist's world of Midkemia – a fantasy setting explored in his *Riftwar Cycle* novels.

To everyone's surprise, *Krondor* became a hit when it was re-released on CD-ROM. It was too late to get the licence back, so a "spiritual successor" was created, re-using *Krondor's* engine in a new setting.



Short Bow
Arrow
Damage: 10
Accuracy: 39% – Enemy Defense

Antara's combat is slow, often challenging and way too frequent; dispatching the armies of enemies blocking your path gets repetitive fast



Melee 16
Scouting 11
Defense 14
Gambling 17
Assessment 11
Lockpicking 15
Repair
Foraging
Haggling
Stealth

Condition: 46%
Health: 32 of 32
Stamina: 5 of 48
Range: 4 of 4
Strength: 13 of 13

Spell Accuracy
Ability to direct magical energy with precision; affects a character's chance of hitting his intended target with ranged spells. Only spellcasters have this skill, instead of archery.

Current Value: 10 of 10
Previous Value: 10
Maximum Value: 40
Study Time: 33%

Characters' skills increase only by studying; you can select up to five skills to be studied at once, and set the percentage of time they will spend on each

As such, on the surface *Betrayal in Antara* plays very much like *Krondor*: a party of three heroes travels across the world in a first-person view, fighting enemies in simple turn-based battles and dealing with the occasional puzzles, side-quests and overly-talkative NPCs along the way.

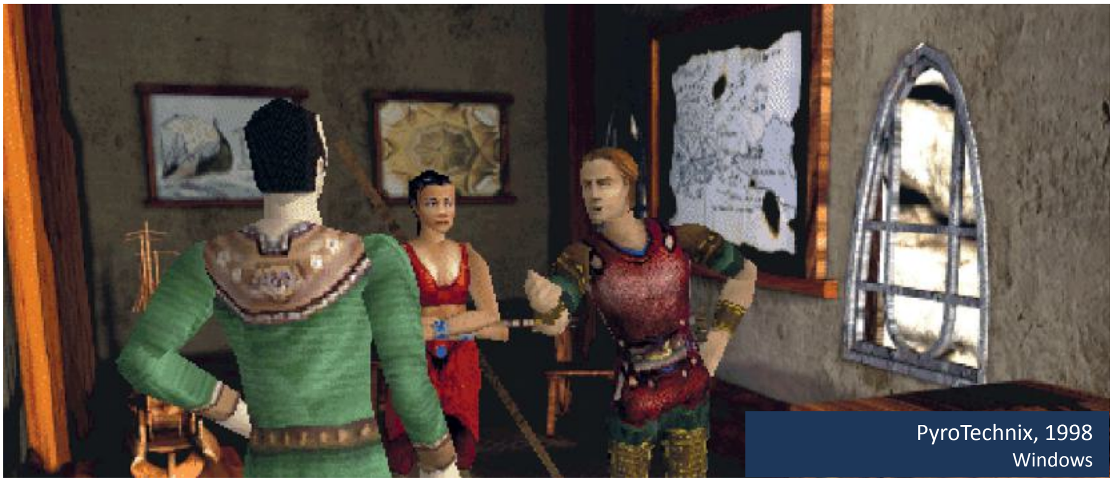
However, it wasn't just the setting that changed – the developers, writing and tone are also entirely different. Instead of emulating a classic fantasy novel with shifting characters and points of view in each chapter, *Antara* delivers a very pedestrian kind of young-adult fiction. There are three main characters, all stereotypical teenagers – the cocky noble, the insecure wizard, and "the girl" – who band together to investigate a mystery, deal with stubborn grown-ups, spout witty lines and ultimately save the kingdom.

That could still be fun, if not for how plain the game itself is. While every element in *Krondor* worked together to form an engaging narrative, *Antara* feels hastily put together. Its world is – and plays as – a bunch of towns with short linear paths between them. It is a barren land, with no lore or sense of place, and has nothing to offer but enemies every five steps.

Most of the game is spent in these filler battles, only so you can reach the next generic town and do linear fetch quests like "boy, bring me tea" (literally). Might be funny in a novel, but it's poorly handled here. The graphics also contribute to the dullness of this world – while the hand-drawn art is charming, the aged engine can render only very limited 3D landscapes and muted, heavily-dithered colours.

Overall, *Betrayal in Antara* is a simple game in which you cross featureless areas and battle countless foes just to read a mediocre young-adult story. Unless you are really starved for more of *Betrayal at Krondor's* gameplay, I'd suggest skipping this one. **FE**

Return to Krondor



PyroTechnix, 1998
Windows

After Sierra cancelled the original sequel to *Betrayal at Krondor* – *Thief of Dreams* – the PyroTechnix studio acquired the Midkemia setting's licence and began working with its author, Raymond E. Feist, on a new game – *Return to Krondor*.

In an ironic twist of fate, PyroTechnix's parent company sold the studio to Sierra, who then published the game as the official sequel to *Betrayal at Krondor*, less than a year after publishing their own "spiritual successor" to that game, *Betrayal in Antara*.

To add to the confusion, *Return to Krondor* has little in common with *Betrayal* besides the setting. A fully-voiced, third-person, 3D point-and-click game mostly set inside a single city, it feels like an adventure/RPG hybrid. It offers some investigative quests with multiple solutions and a few fun puzzles, but the overall gameplay is linear and strict, with rare side-quests, optional areas or character customisation options.

As the squire/reformed thief Jimmy "the Hand" (a returning character from *Betrayal at Krondor*), you must investigate a dangerous man who's been raiding the city of Krondor in search of a lost artefact. The story spans 11 chapters of varying length, with a cast of five heroes who come and go with the plot.

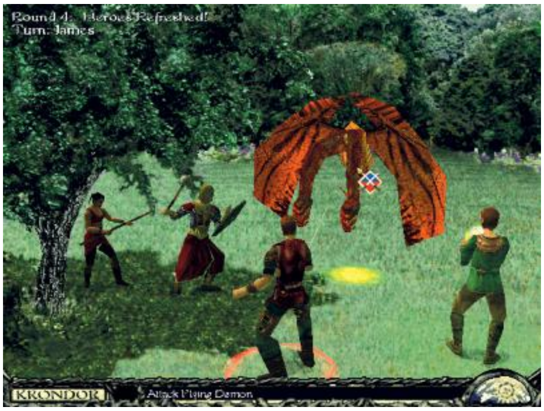
The combat is still turn-based, but was expanded with (poorly explained) features such as battle stances, full/half actions, quick casting, attacks of opportunity, weight penalties and random "fate" bonuses in each round. Most characters die in 2–3 hits, meaning having the initiative often decides the outcome of the battle.

The graphics follow the *Resident Evil* formula of pre-rendered backgrounds with fixed camera angles. Unfortunately, the camera placements are often disorienting or distant, making it hard to see what's happening. The UI is also disappointing, with overdesigned visuals but poor usability, especially in combat.

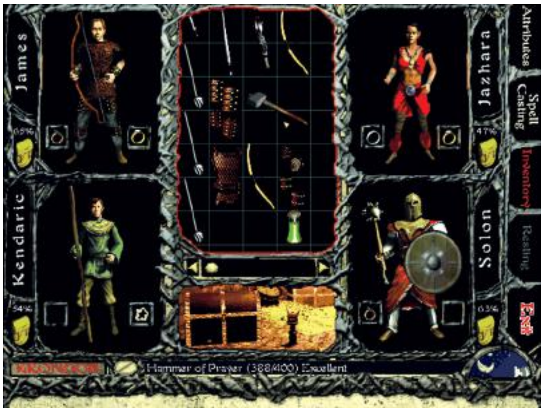
If you come to *Return to Krondor* expecting a sequel to *Betrayal at Krondor*, you will be greatly disappointed. The story penned by Raymond E. Feist is good, but – like the game itself – it's also short, linear and unambitious, save for a few highlights.

Still, those willing to set the game's heritage aside and take *Return to Krondor* for what it is – a simple yet charming story-driven RPG with a great combat system on top – will likely have a good time. **FE**

Raymond E. Feist adapted *Return to Krondor*'s plot into a novel, named *Krondor: Tear of the Gods*. The ending teases a sequel, but Sierra had economic difficulties in 1999 and never made it.

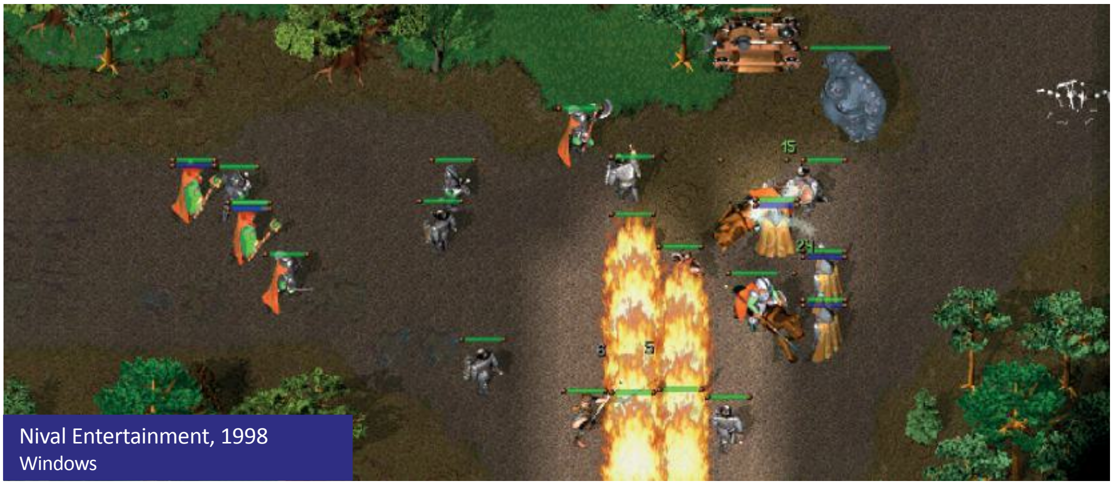


The combat is the best in the series, with several tactical options and small nuances, even if impaired by the lacklustre UI



The game's heroes all have strict classes and there isn't much equipment variety, so don't expect deep character customisation

Rage of Mages



Nival Entertainment, 1998
Windows

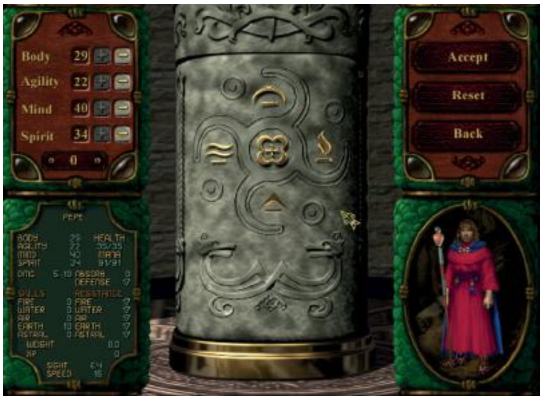
In both *Rage of Mages 1* and *2* you can change the resolution by editing its shortcut. If you add " -1024" at the end of the shortcut's "target" field, the game will run in 1024 × 768.

Before CDProjekt went on to sell millions with AAA games, back when the Polish company was just known for adapting Black Isle and BioWare classics for its domestic market, there was a time when Eastern European developers lived in the obscurity of low-budget "shovelware" titles.

One of those studios was Mir Dialogue. Founded in 1996, it became one of the first game developers of modern capitalist Russia. Soon, the company became Nival, and its first game was an RTS/RPG hybrid called *Allods: The Seal of Mystery* – best known outside Russia as *Rage of Mages*.

You start the game by creating your character, which here just means choosing between the Wizard and Warrior classes, then your name, gender and main skill. There are also four stats you can slightly alter, but they play a very small role.

There are no levels in *Rage of Mages*; your power is mainly defined by your equipment and skill level in five specialisations – Magic Schools for wizards, Weapons for warriors. As in the *Elder Scrolls* games, you improve these skills by simply using particular weapons or spells.



Wizards have five magic types – Fire, Water, Air, Earth and Astral – that increase as you use them, but you'll only learn new spells by buying books

In practice, however, choosing your character at the start is barely relevant. You will play with the four heroes (male/female Warrior and male/female Wizard) anyways, since the other three characters will appear later in the game and join you.

Your adventure starts in a swamp and you have to escort a woman to a nearby village. This basically means killing everyone in your way and not dying before you reach a certain point of the map. Then you achieve victory and go to the next map.

The maps are what anyone could expect from a '90s RTS: rectangles of undiscovered territory hidden by the fog of war. It has a graphic style reminiscent of a less cartoony *Warcraft II*, with more varied terrain, weather changes and a day-night cycle.

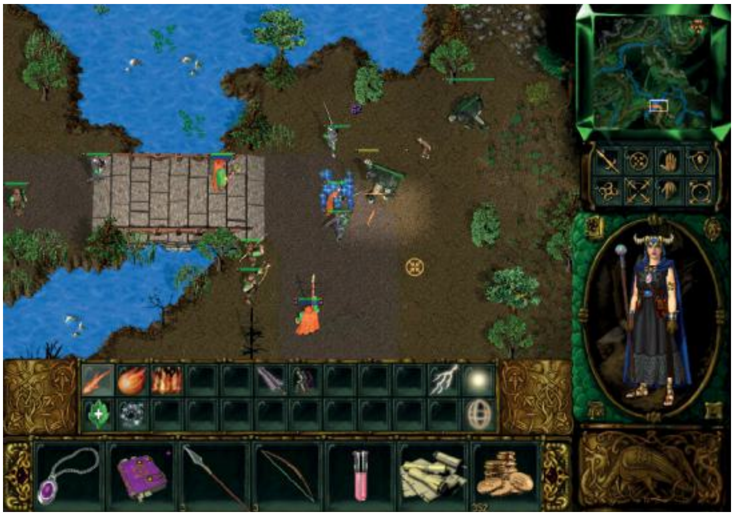
You'll eventually reach the city of Plagat, a well-presented menu where you can buy equipment, talk with NPCs and companions, hire mercenaries, train your characters and start more missions.

As you start to hire more units, you'll truly notice the hybrid nature of the game. There's no resource management, base-building or unit-production, but the basic and most important mechanic of the game is the micromanagement of units. There are even functions like assigning keyboard numbers to different groups of troops, though formations are sadly missing.

Every map contains some objectives to accomplish, usually killing particular monsters or reaching a certain map area. There are no indications or marks on the map, so exploration is necessary, which may lead to additional battles or hidden items.

You move your units, fight the enemies, usually using a lot of hit-and-run tactics (don't feel guilty about that; enemies use them too) and little else. You have to be fast and skilled enough with your mouse, since the game is hard and there's no way to pause and issue orders.

> “People had already begun to form stereotypes of genres, and each player saw (and played) the game through those stereotypes. So, strategy gamers played it as a strategy game, and, of course, it lacked some elements that had come to be considered standard for the genre – the same happened to RPG players. In the end, we weren’t able to convince the hardcore fans of either genre that the mix worked, instead catching a smaller group in between.”
>
> *– Serge Orlovsky, Nival Entertainment’s CEO*



The four main characters can improve their skills and change their equipment, but the rest of your troops are static mercenaries

At stores you’ll find an impressive quantity of equipment to buy and sell. All humanoid enemies drop their equipment, so you’ll get plenty of loot. However, you can only change the equipment of your heroes, and their role in the game decreases quickly.

You automatically fail a mission if a hero gets killed, so you will have to protect them and take them away from the front lines while the mercenaries do all the hard work. For some reason, your warrior heroes are weaker than the hired soldiers, so after a while only the two wizards will remain useful, thanks to the variety of spells; there are 24 of them, which can be absolutely determinant in a fight if you’re quick enough to use them at the right moment.

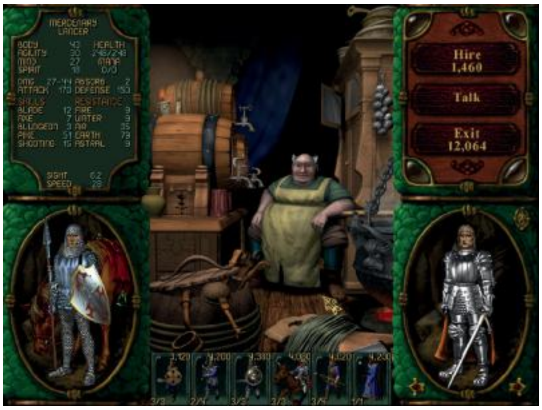
The game is long, and while the first maps can be resolved in a few minutes, some of the later maps can be ridiculously huge and take hours to explore. Sometimes there are also scripted events, short dialogues or just really silly jokes. Those, along with pretty decent CG videos, carry the narrative of the game.

Rage of Mages also has a simple multiplayer mode, which basically consists of fighting and improving your character with other players on dedicated maps.

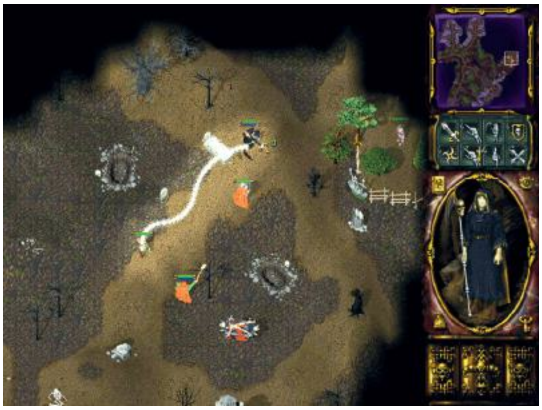
The game was followed by one direct sequel, *Rage of Mages 2: Necromancer* (1999), which added several improvements such as better AI, auto-casting and more side-quests, plus a map editor that earned it a small but loyal fan base, active for a few years. Later came a surprisingly good 3D spiritual successor called *Evil Islands: Curse of the Lost Soul* (2000), and the free-to-play MMORPG *Allods Online* (2011).

Rage of Mages could’ve been just another old low-budget title, buried among the many releases of the golden age of Western RPGs, but it still has an important place in recent Russian software history.

Even if you disregard its historical value, there’s a certain naivety and fairy-tale feeling here that make it quite charming. It’s a nice little game, with a great presentation, that can provide hours of mouse action and treasure-hunting. **LEV**

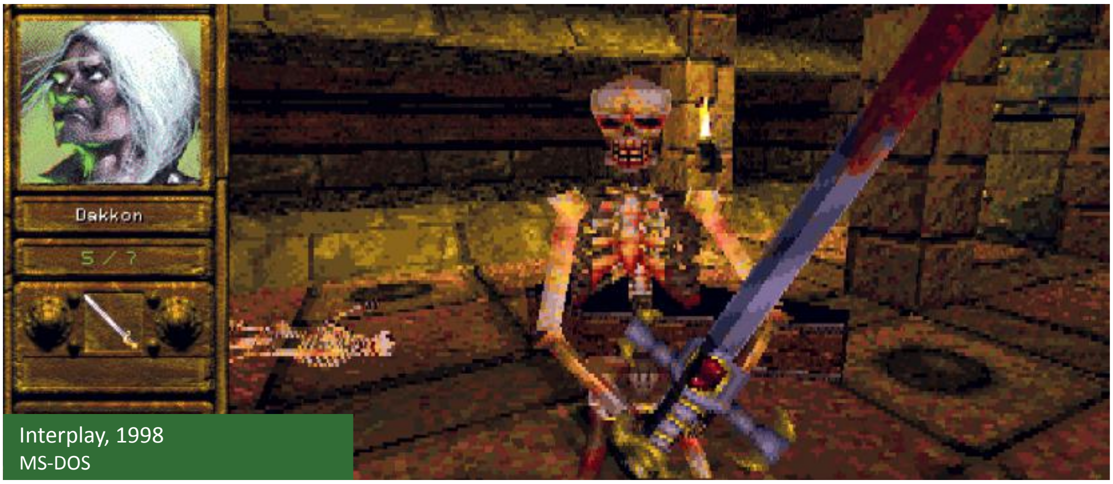


Each mission you must hire mercenaries to join you; they come with their own equipment, which can’t be changed



Rage of Mages 2 is even harder than the first game, but plays better thanks to many gameplay improvements

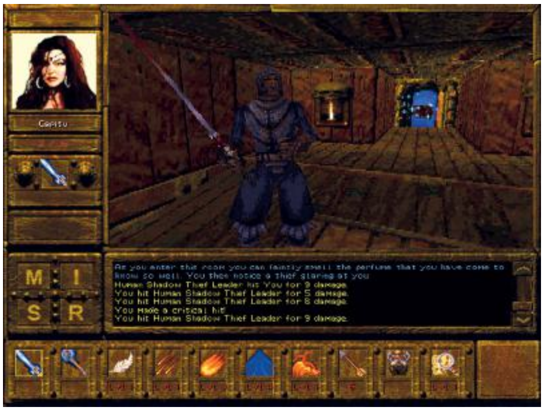
Descent to Undermountain



Interplay, 1998
MS-DOS

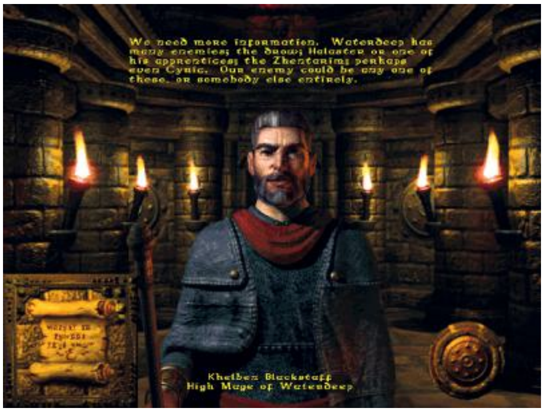
Back in the mid-’90s, Interplay’s internal teams were working on two CRPGs: their big bet was the eagerly awaited *Descent to Undermountain*; the other was a small side-project named *Fallout*.

Some context is needed: Interplay scored a hit in 1994 by publishing *Descent*, a 3D, zero-gravity FPS in which you controlled a spaceship and could move in any direction. Around the same time, the company bought a licence to make games based on *AD&D*.



As you enter the room you can faintly smell the perfume that you have come to know so well. You then notice a thief glaring at you
Human Shadow Thief Leader hit You for 9 damage.
You hit Human Shadow Thief Leader for 5 damage.
You hit Human Shadow Thief Leader for 8 damage.
You made a critical hit
You hit Human Shadow Thief Leader for 9 damage.

Combat is real-time, dull and mostly luck-based, as enemies can kill you in one or two hits – if they can roll past your Armour class



We need more information. Waterdeep has many enemies; the drow; Halaster or one of his apprentices; the Zhentarim; perhaps even Cyric. Our enemy could be any one of these, or somebody else entirely.

Khelben Blackstaff
High Mage of Waterdeep

Your main quest comes from Khelben Blackstaff in Waterdeep, but you’ll find many creatures inside dungeons asking for help or offering rewards

Thus, a bold idea was born: a fully 3D *AD&D* multiplayer dungeon crawler on the *Descent* engine! While a clever business decision, the technical side was a disaster. Unfamiliar with the engine, the team struggled and the game was delayed for years, then suddenly rushed out for Christmas 1997. While officially released in January 1998, many stores did sell it in December 1997 – before any review was published. It had no multiplayer (a feature still listed on the box), and was borderline unplayable, with constant crashes, floating enemies, broken AI, unclimbable ladders and other serious bugs.

Even if you got the game to work, combat was a mess. *AD&D’s* dice-based rules were crudely adapted into a real-time action RPG in which monsters and the player just keep missing each other until someone scores a lucky dice roll – in which case a single blow can kill your character during the first several hours.

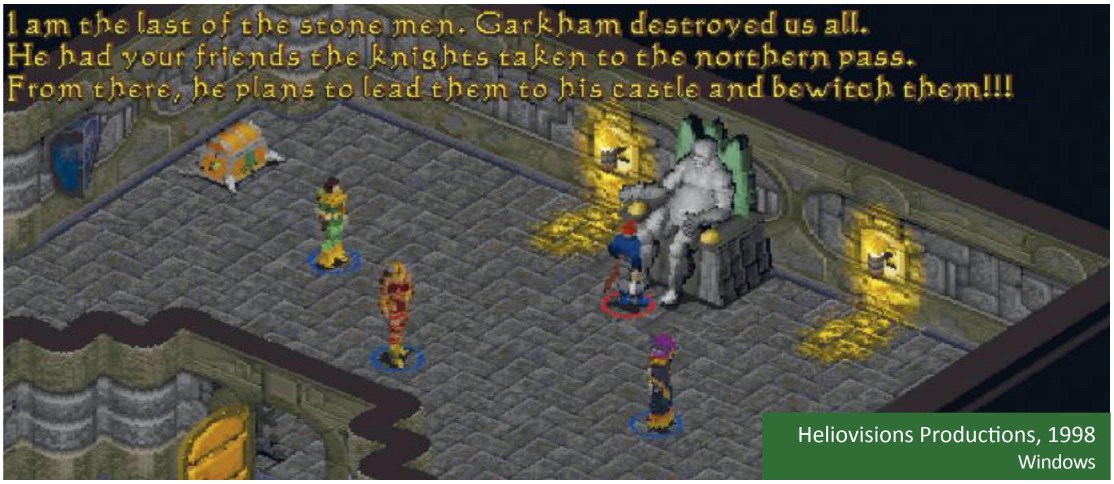
Similarly, you can play as a Fighter, Cleric, Thief or Mage (or even multi-class) – with iconic spells like Fireball, Invisibility and Feather Fall. But until you level up a few times, you’re limited to one spell per day. After that, your options are to battle monsters with a dagger or to find a (rare) safe place to rest.

There isn’t much enemy or environment variety, but at least the setting and lore are both well employed, with Undermountain, a massive dungeon beneath the city of Waterdeep, being a great location for a CRPG.

Comprising four hubs and several interconnected dungeons, Undermountain is filled with traps, hidden ways, optional areas and NPCs with unusual quests and dialogues, and has a great soundtrack. The dungeons are well-done, although too reliant on illusory walls.

Sadly, any quality to *Descent to Undermountain* is buried deep beneath a barely working engine, game-breaking bugs, muddy graphics, tedious combat and many unfulfilled promises. **FE**

Hexplore



I am the last of the stone men. Garkham destroyed us all.
He had your friends the knights taken to the northern pass.
From there, he plans to lead them to his castle and bewitch them!!!

Heliovisions Productions, 1998
Windows

Hexplore is an isometric, party-based RPG from France. It had a number of interesting technical aspects and gameplay solutions, but never achieved much success and is relatively unknown, even to veterans of the genre.

Set during the Crusades in a fantastic version of Earth, the game follows Mac Bride, an adventurer, as he tries to track down missing fellow knights and, of course, save the world in the process. During the first level he is joined by three other companions – an archer, a warrior and a sorcerer.

Each character has a unique set of weapons and utility items at their disposal. Mac is a generalist who uses bombs, melee and short-range weapons. The archer uses long-range weapons and can reveal hidden places on the map. The warrior uses a number of powerful melee weapons and explosives, while the wizard can heal, make the party invisible or rain fire from above. As the game progresses, characters gain access to three additional upgrades for each weapon, which increases its damage/usefulness and even changes the way it behaves, in some cases.

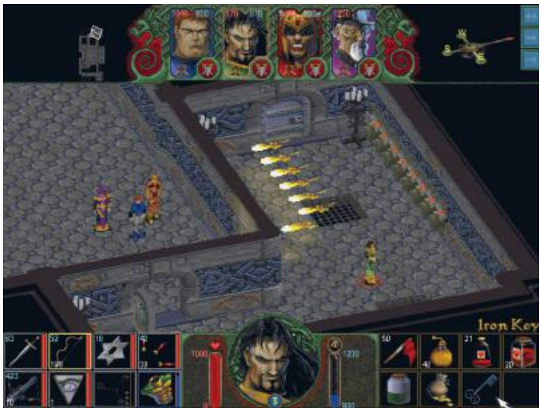
There are 12 huge levels spanning many open spaces and explorable interiors. Each level also features a number of puzzles for which each character needs to use their unique skill (fit through a tight opening, operate mechanical devices, etc.) to complete it. Party members often need to split up in order to solve the puzzles, scout ahead or draw fire away from weaker allies. Managing the whole party is quite easy, thanks to a simple and efficient interface.

Unlike other isometric RPGs from the late ’90s, *Hexplore* is fully 3D and allows you to freely rotate the camera – something you’ll need to do a lot to uncover all the treasures, keys and secrets hidden in its cleverly constructed environments.

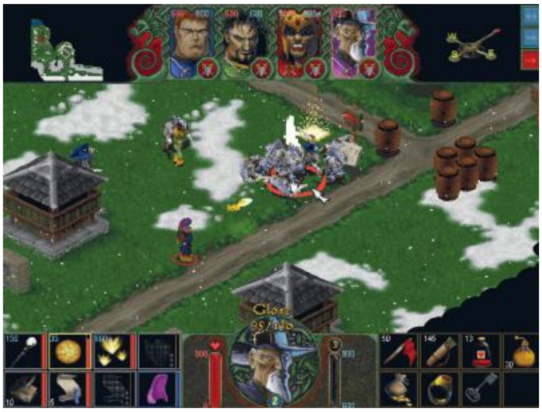
Hexplore is also one of the rare games that uses a voxel-based engine (instead of polygons). It was pretty fast for its time, but even then the graphics looked muddled. This was made up for somewhat with hand-drawn cutscenes and a memorable soundtrack.

The game also supported 4-player multiplayer, but this never became popular. Overall, *Hexplore* is a fun, niche game that didn’t improve upon existing standards, but remains an interesting experiment. **OU**

To run *Hexplore* on modern PCs you’re going to need the fan patch; otherwise the game will crash every few seconds.

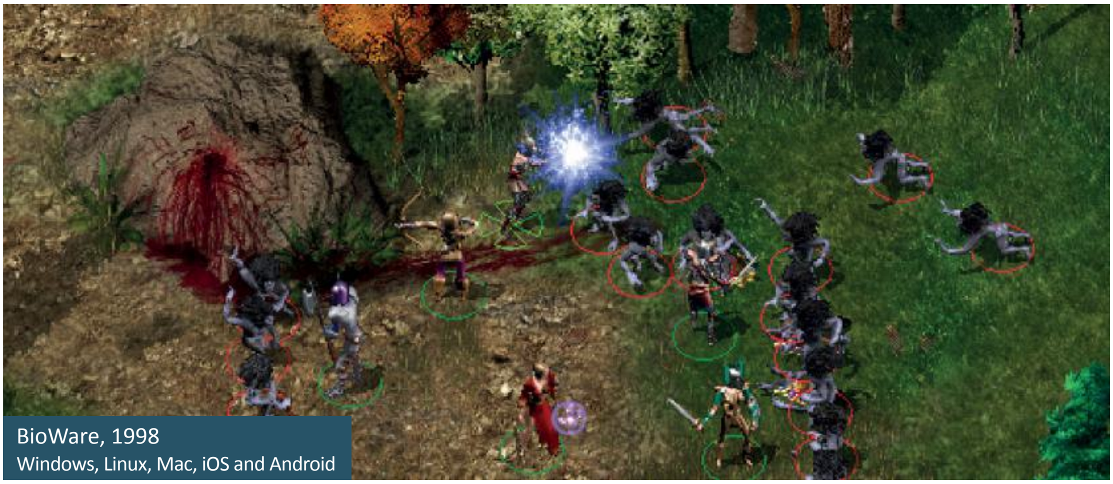


The later areas of the game focus heavily on puzzles and exploration, with mazes full of traps, keys and secret switches



Combat is simple, real-time and a bit *Diablo*-like; you can change the game’s speed to plough through easy enemies or carefully battle tougher foes

Baldur's Gate



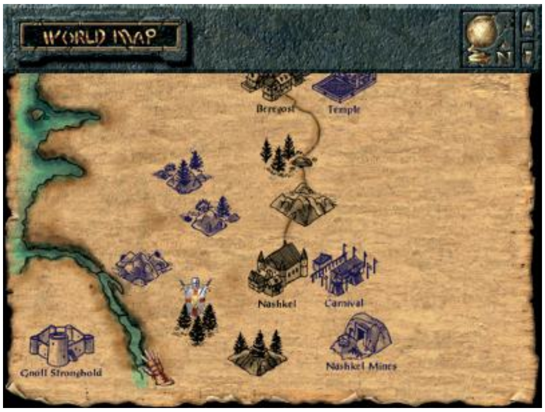
BioWare, 1998
Windows, Linux, Mac, iOS and Android

***Baldur's Gate* was the first game to use the legendary Infinity Engine, which also powered the *Icewind Dale* games and *Planescape: Torment*. In 2012 fans created GemRB, an open-source version of the engine.**

Much has been written about how *Final Fantasy VII* changed the fate of JRPGs upon its release in 1997. Rather less about how, a year later, *Baldur's Gate* revitalised the CRPG genre.

After the genre tapered off during the mid-'90s, losing its appeal to "*Doom*-clones", RTS games and the rising popularity of consoles, some CRPG developers were left wondering if they had coded themselves into a corner. *Baldur's Gate*, though, managed to bring them back to the spotlight, selling two million copies worldwide and forever elevating the recently founded BioWare into a household name for CRPGs.

It's not that it was the only CRPG around. The revered *Fallout* series began a year before, to similar critical acclaim – but only a tiny fraction of the sales. Part of the appeal behind *Baldur's Gate* comes from the popular *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* ruleset, here applied to a friendly real-time-with-pause battle system that has since become one of the most beloved in the genre – think an RTS in which the space bar pauses the action, providing players with tight control over a party of six highly specialised characters.



Exploration is unique, as key locations are connected by "empty" roads and wilderness areas you must cross, making the world more immersive

Battles are then seamlessly integrated into the exploration of the huge world, a vast region of Forgotten Realms composed of several interlocking maps – including the six-map wonder that is the eponymous city of Baldur's Gate – peppered with combat encounters of varying challenge levels.

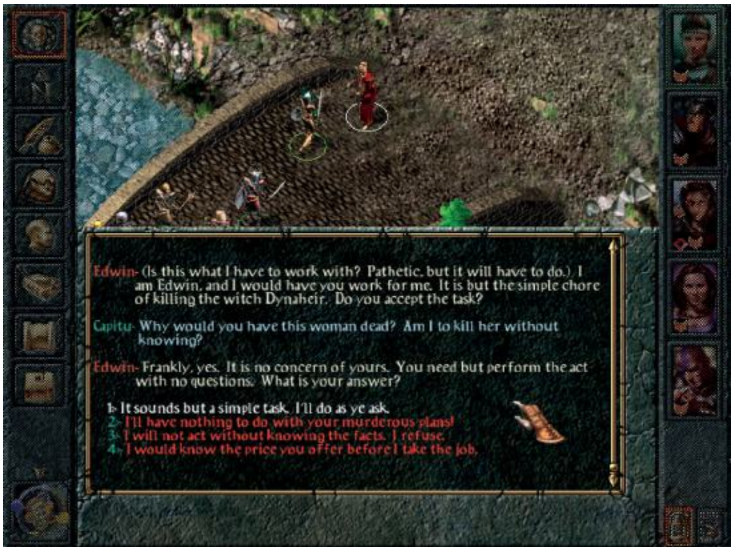
While not strictly an open world, the way the maps interlock with one another, and the fact that you can (mostly) freely explore them, make *Baldur's Gate* feel like one. There is an addictive feel to mapping out the areas as you advance and clear the map's "fog of war"; exploration is rewarded often, but not often enough to make it feel that anywhere you went there were "shinies" waiting for you.

In fact, *Baldur's Gate* is often a masterclass in the art of using useless space. Many buildings are enterable, but have little of interest inside. Many maps are just odd stretches of forest with little more than a couple of enemy encounters. The world, then, exists on its own merits, not, as is common in modern games, as a mere playground for the gamer. This makes it feel more real, and more meaningful on the rare occasions when you do find something unique and useful to you.

Dungeons are ever-present, of course, littered with traps, if unfortunately light on puzzles. Dragons are notoriously absent, due to a hard level cap (often modded out by min-maxing players) that would make such encounters near impossible in accordance with the *AD&D* rules. Other than that, the game's enemy variety has seldom been surpassed.

The *AD&D* ruleset also powers a rich character creation system, offering players a lot of freedom to craft their own, unique protagonist – later joined by a colourful cast of companions that would set the foundation for BioWare's character writing.

> “We looked at RTSs, such as *Command & Conquer* and *Warcraft*. You’d click on characters and they’d say something back to you, and it was a surprise. In *Jagged Alliance*, one character would take out a gun and start shooting the other because they’d had an argument. We wanted to make [the characters in *Baldur’s Gate*] feel like real people, not NPCs who were AI-controlled. They really felt like they had personalities and came to life.”
>
> *– Dr. Ray Muzyka, BioWare’s co-founder*



Edwin- (Is this what I have to work with? Pathetic, but it will have to do.) I am Edwin, and I would have you work for me. It is but the simple chore of killing the witch Dynaheir. Do you accept the task?

Capitu- Why would you have this woman dead? Am I to kill her without knowing?

Edwin- Frankly, yes. It is no concern of yours. You need but perform the act with no questions. What is your answer?

1- It sounds but a simple task. I'll do as ye ask.
2- I'll have nothing to do with your murderous plans!
3- I will not act without knowing the facts. I refuse.
4- I would know the price you offer before I take the job.

The main quest is fairly linear, but the side-quests often allow you to pick sides, such as helping Edwin to kill the witch Dynaheir, or joining Minsc to rescue her

The excellent voice work and elegant mechanic quirks (the ranger Minsc has one quick-slot assigned to his pet hamster; the married couple, Khalid and Jaheira, will only stay in the party as a pair) gave these companions personality, while the fact that equipped weapons and armour were represented on the in-game models gave the player a way to make them his own.

Lest we forget, however, the *AD&D* system was created as a framework on top of which tabletop players would layer improvisation and role-playing, helped or thwarted by the all-seeing Dungeon Master player. No such flexibility exists here, resulting more often than not on unbalanced encounters that require one to rely on the dice as much as strategy – and sometimes on the saving graces of the save and load.

Followed by the solid *Tales of the Sword Coast* expansion and by an even better sequel, *Baldur’s Gate* remains an often replayed classic, thanks to extensive curation, earlier on by fans and currently by Beamdog.

The company, formed by former Bioware staff, re-released the game and its sequel, adjusting them for modern computers (and tablets) and even adding some new content. As a result, *Baldur’s Gate: Enhanced Edition* is accepted as the most complete out-of-the-box way to play this legendary game. And blissfully compatible with original mods – because you’ll still want to unlock that level cap. **LM**

Mods:

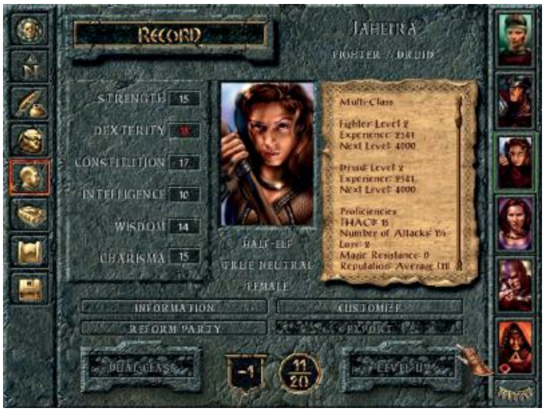
Baldur’s Gate Trilogy-WeiDU: An excellent fan-made alternative to the *Enhanced Edition*, it combines both *Baldur’s Gate* games into one vastly improved game.

BG1 Tweak Pack: A pack of customisable changes and tweaks, like unlocking level caps or hiding helmets.

Unfinished Business: Restores a lot of cut content.

The Fields of the Dead: A huge mod that makes rules more faithful to *AD&D* and adds a lot of content.

In 2016 Beamdog released *Baldur’s Gate: Siege of Dragonspear*, an expansion pack for the Enhanced Edition of BG, set between the first and second games.



JAHEIRA
FIGHTER / DRUID

STRENGTH 15
DEXTERITY [illegible]
CONSTITUTION 17
INTELLIGENCE 10
WISDOM 14
CHARISMA 15

HALF-ELF
TRUE NEUTRAL
FEMALE

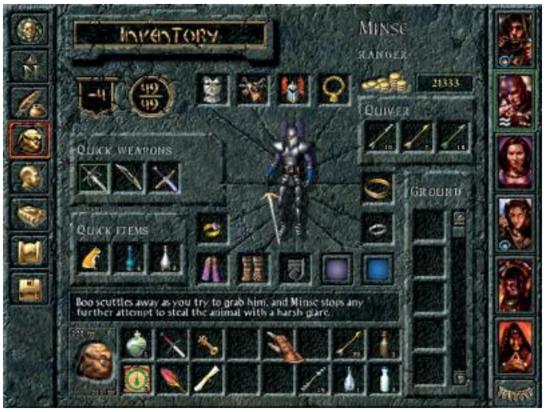
Multi-Class

Fighter Level 2
Experience: 2541
Next Level: 4000

Druid Level 2
Experience: 2541
Next Level: 4000

Proficiencies
THAC0: 15
Number of Attacks: 1½
Lore: 2
Magic Resistance: 0
Reputation: Average (10)

While combat was translated into real-time, BioWare retained an impressive degree of the *AD&D* ruleset’s depth



Boo scuttles away as you try to grab him, and Minsc stops any further attempt to steal the animal with a harsh glare.

The charismatic companions, diverse equipment, iconic classes and efficient UI makes party-building a joy

Might and Magic VI: The Mandate of Heaven

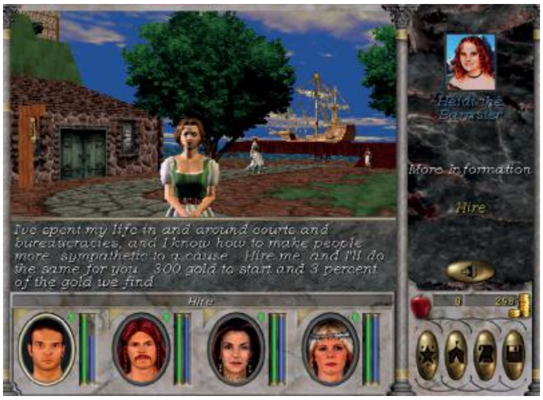
New World Computing, 1998
Windows

After a five-year hiatus, New World Computing returned to *Might and Magic*, leaving behind the flat world of Xeen to bring the series to the three-dimensional continent of Enroth, home to the first two *Heroes of Might and Magic* games.

After releasing the *Xeen* duology, NWC created the *Heroes of Might and Magic* spin-off series: fantasy strategy games that over time became more popular than the main *M&M* RPG series itself.

A radically different game, *Might and Magic VI* eschews the 2D, grid-based world of its predecessors in favour of a more modern, 3D, free-roaming world. As in early FPS titles like *Doom*, the engine renders 3D environments and 2D enemy sprites.

The game is primarily played in real time and features a day-night cycle, with an in-game minute passing every two seconds. Actions such as travel, rest and training advance the clock by hours or days at a time, and the game's shops, stables and ships abide by a rigid schedule: most businesses close overnight, and travel services only run their routes on specific days of the week. Your party will need to occasionally stop to rest and eat; they'll press on if you let them, but their condition will deteriorate over time, leading to exhaustion and even death! In spite of this, managing time in-game isn't difficult, and adds to the sense of immersion.



I've spent my life in and around courts and bureaucracies, and I know how to make people more sympathetic to a cause. Hire me, and I'll do the same for you. 300 gold to start and 3 percent of the gold we find

You can hire up to two NPCs to help you; they offer spells, skills and passive bonuses, though they don't fight, and they'll take a percentage of all the money you find

Combat in *Might and Magic VI* is a hybrid between real-time and turn-based gameplay, and generally takes place against dozens of enemies at a time. Real-time combat can be hectic, but exciting: a player might often find themselves running backwards, evading incoming projectiles while pumping spells and arrows into the advancing horde.

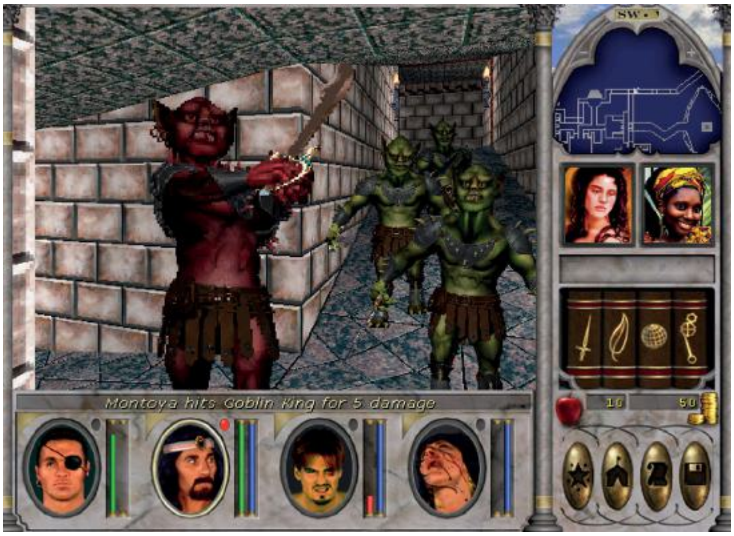
At any time, pressing Enter toggles a turn-based mode, leading to a more tactical experience. While turn-based mode is switched on, the party may not move, but the player has time to make more deliberate choices during combat. A player might find themselves gravitating to either real-time or turn-based combat, or mixing them: both modes have their advantages, and are viable in most situations.

Your party consists of four human adventurers, who can specialise in one of six different classes. *M&MVI* introduced the now-classic formula of seeking trainers to improve your skills, with the skill masters being hidden in obscure places. Characters are free to master any skill their class has access to, and can learn any spell in their available spell schools.

However, there are a significant number of spells which don't scale well into the later game, or simply don't work at all! Later *M&M* games fix these issues, but place more limits on which spells a class can learn, and which skills they can master. As a result, character classes in this game are less specialised and more homogeneous than in its sequels, but the player has more freedom to develop them as they see fit.

The balance tends to favour spell-casting classes, due in part to the raw power of Light and Dark magic and the sheer utility of Water and Air. Physical classes quickly drop off in power, but their ability to survive can save the party, and they tend to have more points to spend on non-combat skills like Repair.

> “Although controversial, I feel the most important thing was the turn-based/real-time combat system. We really gave this a lot of thought, and I think this was the key to bringing *Might and Magic*’s party-based system into the post-*Doom* 3D world.”
>
> – *Jon Van Caneghem,* Might and Magic*’s creator*



Montoya hits Goblin King for 5 damage

The dungeons are huge and filled with hordes of enemies; luckily, the automap is excellent, and you can rest inside the dungeon if you find a safe area and have enough food remaining

Your party will start out feeling rather weak, but will ramp up steadily in power as you play. It can be very satisfying to return to an area that once gave you trouble, and cut a swath of destruction through it!

Might and Magic VI takes place after the events of *Heroes of Might and Magic II*, but it does not follow a completely linear narrative – it is quite open-ended in its structure. While the starting town of New Sorpigal has a useful assortment of low-level quests and dungeons, most regions are accessible from the very beginning of the game, and many quests, even within the main quest line, can be completed in any order.

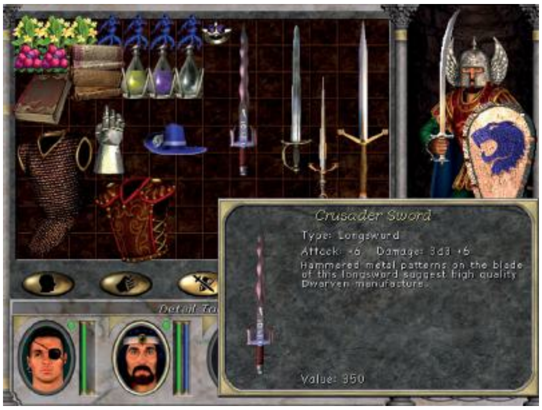
Dungeons are typically sizeable in scope and overflowing with enemies, and range from unremarkable caves and sewers to lavish ruins and high-tech control centres. The world itself is quite large, with about 15 large outdoor regions and over 30 dungeons. Locales include the snowy mountains of White Cap, the haunted Mire of the Damned, and Dragonsand, a desert unsurprisingly full of dragons.

There are plenty of ways to get around: regions can be reached either on foot or via ships or stables, which can quickly move a player between towns. A party with an advanced spellcaster has additional conveniences: for instance, a Water Master can save beacons to warp to at a later time, or instantly teleport the party to certain cities. Air magic’s Fly spell is my personal favourite: your party gains the power to soar freely through the air, raining death onto any unsuspecting enemies below.

The new *M&M* engine and gameplay style would be used in two more games, *Might and Magic VII: For Blood and Honor* (1998) and *Might and Magic VIII: Day of the Destroyer* (2000). But while they add polish to the engine, they don’t match *M&MVI*’s nearly 100 hours of gameplay, meaty dungeon crawls and emphasis on free-form exploration.

For these reasons and more, *Might and Magic VI: The Mandate of Heaven* may well be one of the best computer RPGs of its time. **DH**

The *GrayFace MM6 Patch* fixes many bugs and add new features like key re-mapping and mouselook. If you want more adventures, you can also try the *Chaos Conspiracy* mod, a new fan-made campaign.



Crusader Sword

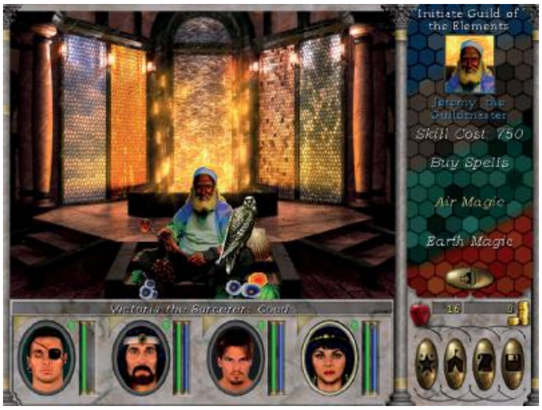
Type: Longsword

Attack: +6 Damage: 3d3 +6

Hammered metal patterns on the blade of this longsword suggest high quality Dwarven manufacture.

Value: 350

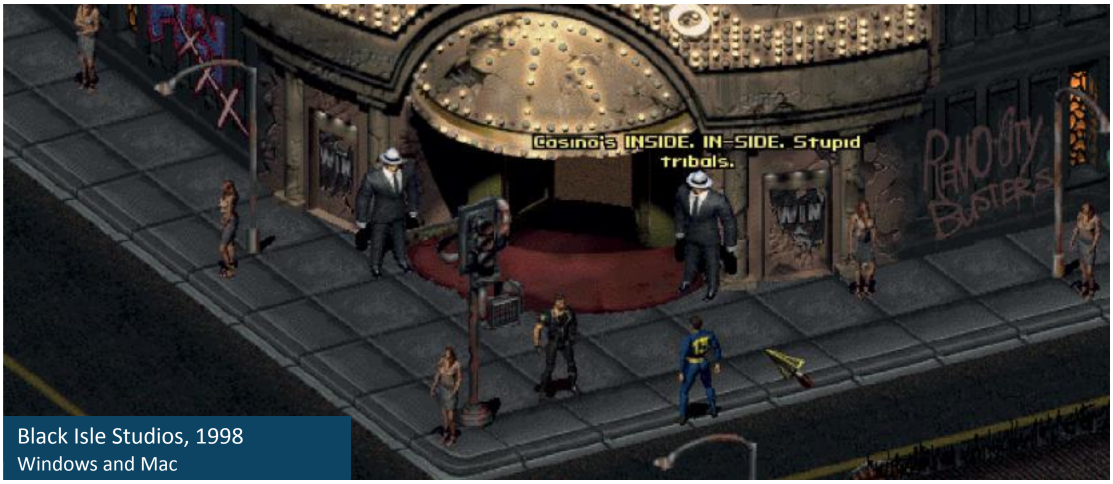
The inventory is now grid-based, with nice equipment artwork, a paper doll and – finally – item descriptions



Victoria the Sorceress: Good

Dungeons are 3D, but shops, guilds, houses and other internal locations are shown through charming 2D art

Fallout 2



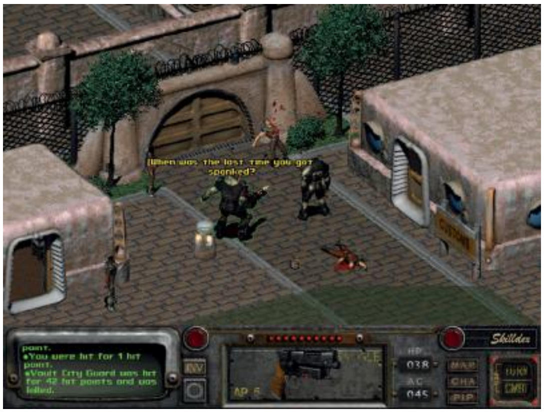
Black Isle Studios, 1998
Windows and Mac

***Fallout 1* and *2* were both heavily censored in some countries. The UK and German releases removed all children from the games, making some side-quests impossible to complete.**

"You will be able to prostitute your spouse in New Reno!" Lost in the pages of a video-game magazine, these few words were the first contact I had with *Fallout 2*. Needless to say, I was thoroughly delighted with this statement: I was young, my moral compass wasn't quite functional yet and – most of all – I did have hormonal disorders. The same kind that seems to plague most boys of my age. Naturally, I felt *Fallout 2* was made for me.

Walking in the footsteps of its big brother barely a year after the latter's release, *Fallout 2* had to answer a lot of players' expectations. It did so, but in quite an unexpected way.

First, you're not the Vault Dweller anymore, but his grandchild – a brahmin-herdin' gecko-hunting neo-tribal. As the "Chosen One", you must find the Garden of Eden Creation Kit, a pre-war terraforming device that can save your village from starvation. This GECK in itself is little more than a MacGuffin, a pretext to send you on a trip through the ruthless remnants of a post-nuclear West Coast. *Fallout*'s setting has, in itself, always been the true star of the show.



point.
•You were hit for 1 hit point.
•Vault City Guard was hit for 42 hit points and was killed.

Fallout 2 has 14 recruitable NPCs and allows you some control over their tactics and equipment, but they are still very unreliable in some battles

Black Isle's team made sure that you would roam the wasteland in the right conditions: the game is even more open than its predecessor and you will discover new locations as you go through the desert and talk to its denizens. The elusive nature of your quest will ensure that you will go through most of the West Coast and its broken, twisted communities before getting a lead on where the GECK is located. The order of the locations you visit is not set, and each town provides another viewpoint on the conflicts playing out.

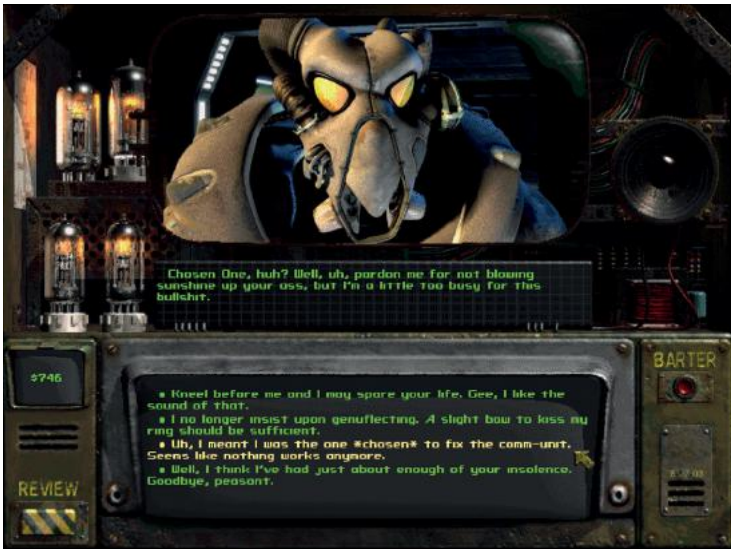
Decades have passed since you walked the wasteland in the first game: communities have somewhat evolved and human societies had enough time to rebuild themselves. Though the rule of law now seemingly governs many of those settlements, you will quickly discover that these "laws" doesn't necessarily mean "greater good" and that man is still a wolf to man. You will encounter countless situations where slavery is perfectly accepted, and where people are experimented upon with drugs in so-called "stables".

When it comes to player freedom, open-worldness is not the only thing *Fallout 2* has going for it, for the game is tailored to reward you for going your own way. The early-game ammo scarcity, the frequency at which you'll end up outnumbered and outgunned, basically encourages you to find ways to get your first decent gear, often in undignified ways. Again, the world of *Fallout* is ruthless, and you might just have to take sides in petty gang wars, pillage graves, sell slaves and rob honest people's homes in order to survive.

Always promoting the player's agenda, the way most of the skills are used is left to the player's discretion, including when and how to use them. You're rarely prompted to use them at all, and no message will pop up to tell you which quest can be solved by sneaking into the criminal kingpin's office.

"I think it [New Reno] presents a lot of fun role-playing opportunities and things to do, no matter what type of character you are. But does it fit in the setting? No, probably not. It's too sexually over-the-top, too much profanity, and the look and attitude of some of the characters is too modern-day to complement the feel of the *Fallout* world (...) But I still think it was fun to play, and it was fun to design."

– Chris Avellone,
Fallout 2*'s designer*



Chosen One, huh? Well, uh, pardon me for not blowing sunshine up your ass, but I'm a little too busy for this bullshit.

- Kneel before me and I may spare your life. Gee, I like the sound of that.
- I no longer insist upon genuflecting. A slight bow to kiss my ring should be sufficient.
- Uh, I meant I was the one *chosen* to fix the comm-unit. Seems like nothing works anymore.
- Well, I think I've had just about enough of your insolence. Goodbye, peasant.

Fallout 2's humour is dark, witty and full of pop culture references; you'll talk like a smart-ass, make jokes about cannibalism, quote movies and may even pull off prank calls

By giving the player as much freedom as possible, from the character creation screen to the quests and dialogue trees, the developers entrusted the players with crafting their own experience out of the game and playing it the way they wanted – all the way down to the ending, which is intricately affected by player actions during the game.

As for the combat, the game abides by the rules set by its predecessor: turn-based combat on a hexagonal map. Each turn, you are limited by the number of action points you must carefully distribute between firing, aiming, running (away) or accessing your inventory.

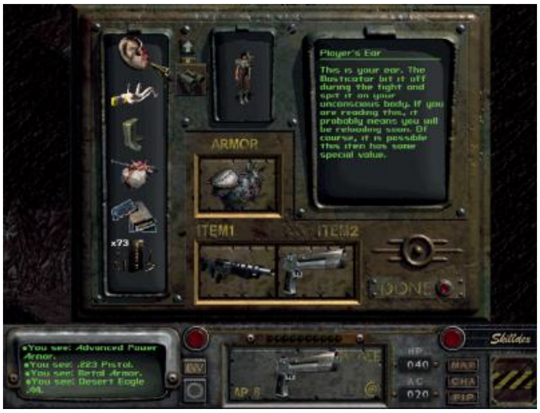
Fallout 2 proposes some tactical options but, in all honesty, the most satisfying experience you'll get from its combat system is blowing up your enemies' innards in a forceful shotgun blast and reading hilarious message feedbacks after *intentionally* popping up one of your enemies' gonads.

Truth be said, humour is one of *Fallout 2*'s main drivers. While *Fallout 1* focused on delivering a minutely-crafted and focused experience, its sequel breaks a great many walls – fourth one included – in order to let the players frolic to their heart's content.

You can blow up a toilet and smear a town of starving farmers with shit, offer candy to a little boy, cut raiders in two with a laser mini-gun, grow a sixth toe, become a famous porn star, and get your ear bitten off during a boxing match. Through its great variety of locations and situations, *Fallout 2* will provide you with experiences, playlets and dialogue you'll never see in any other videogame.

Even by today's standards, *Fallout 2* is too unusual an experience to pass up. It is not only an excellent RPG, it is also an exceptional game in itself. Its quirky writing, legendary setting and inviting gameplay will provide countless hours of entertainment, provided you're not averse to wading through delicious post-apocalyptic filth. **BC**

In 2004, Russian fans created *FOnline*, an unofficial *Fallout* MMO engine. Several MMORPGs derived from it, such as *FOnline 2*, *FOnline: Reloaded* and *FO:Ashes of Phoenix*. You can play any of these for free.



Player's Ear

This is your ear. The Busticator bit it off during the fight and spit it on your unconscious body. If you are reading this, it probably means you will be reloading soon. Of course, it is possible this item has some special value.

- You see: Advanced Power Armor.
- You see: .223 Pistol.
- You see: Metal Armor.
- You see: Desert Eagle .44.

Guns, armour, drugs, explosives, sex toys, car parts and even your own body parts are some of the items you'll find

Mods:

UPU: The "Unofficial Patch, Updated"; it's a must-have bug fix.

RPU: The "Restoration Patch, Updated". Restores a lot of cut content, including several locations and Kaga, your "rival" Chosen One. Already includes the UPU patch.

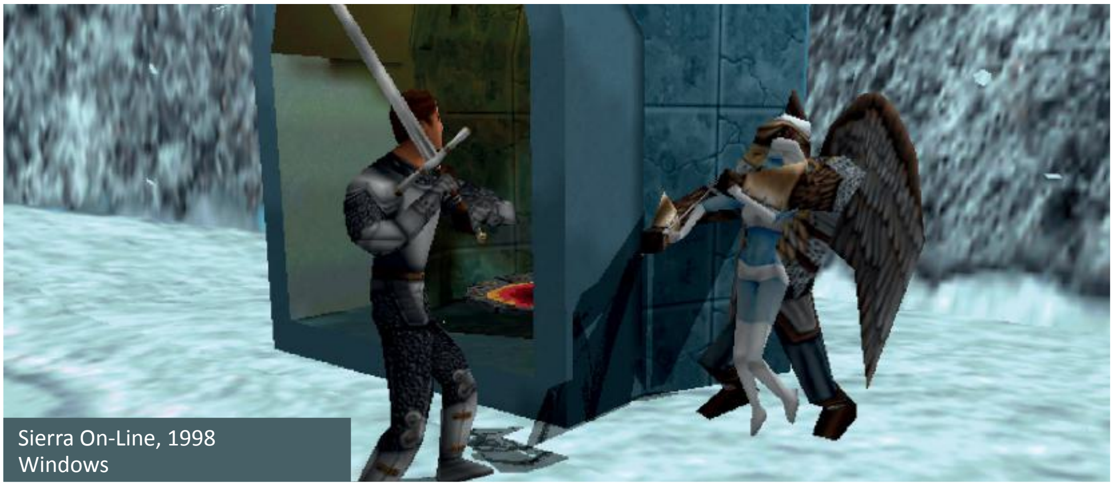
MIB88 Megamod: A mod pack that adds new areas, and various features, and lets you visit *Fallout 1* areas.

Oblivion Lost: A Russian mod that blends *Fallout 2* with *STALKER: Shadows of Chernobyl*. It's quite funny.

Fallout 1.5: Resurrection: A critically acclaimed mod that offers a full 25-hour campaign. A great RPG in its own right: it's highly recommended.

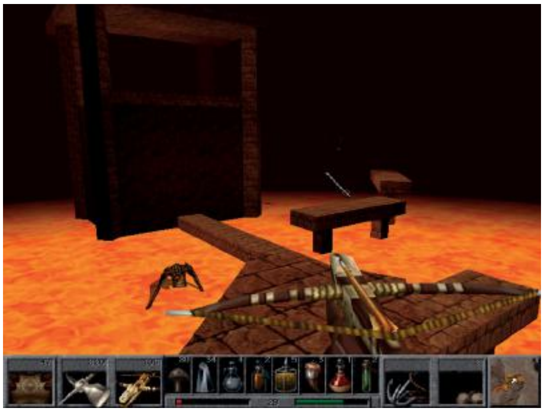
Several total conversion mods for *Fallout 2* exist, such as *Sonora*, *Shattered Destiny*, *Mutants Rising*, *Olympus 2207* and *Fallout: Nevada*. Only the last two are available in English.

King's Quest:
Mask of Eternity

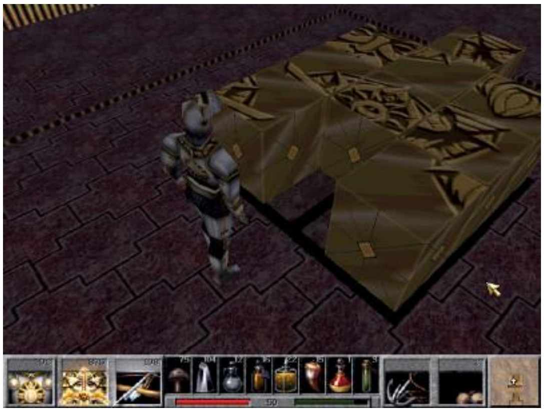


Sierra On-Line, 1998
Windows

The fabled designer Roberta Williams had a big problem in the late '90s. The gaming market was booming, consoles and 3D action titles were selling millions, but adventure games were considered a dead genre. Sierra, the company she founded in 1979, was still a giant corporation, but Roberta and her husband had sold it in 1996 (although they still worked there). And now Sierra's new owners were desperate for a big hit.



Shooting enemies in first-person mode during a platforming section wasn't exactly what the fans expected from a *King's Quest* game



Mask of Eternity abandoned the often confusing logic puzzles of adventure games for simple mechanical ones; thus, one of the three trials to prove yourself a worthy champion is a sliding puzzle

So Roberta took some of the most popular games of the time – *Quake, Tomb Raider* and *Diablo* – added then-innovative 3D graphics and tried to create a new style of adventure game, one that would attract this modern gaming audience into her *King's Quest* series.

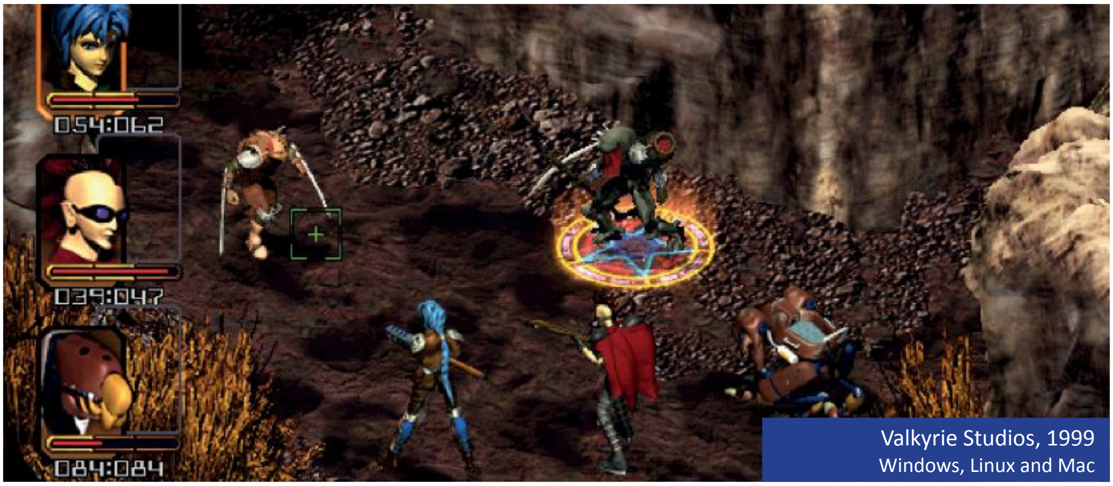
The result is an action RPG that can be played in either first- or third-person mode, complete with real-time combat, platforming sections and even a grappling hook that allows you to climb walls. Many RPG elements were also added, such as levels and experience points, various weapons and armour, and even a *Diablo*-like belt of magical potions.

However, little from the previous *King's Quest* games is present. While occasionally you'll come across one or two puzzles – such as using an axe to chop down a tree, so that it diverts the flow of a river and stops a nearby mill – those are extremely rare. And don't expect a single dialogue tree either. Most of the time you'll progress by killing everything that moves, and then clicking on everything that doesn't.

All this could eventually be overlooked had the rest of the game been good. But it just isn't. Moving and jumping feels clunky (the infamous "tank controls"), combat is nothing but clicking on enemies while chugging potions, environments are dull and empty, the writing is childish and the game simply never manages to excite the player in any way.

Looking back, Roberta was in a difficult position and tried her best to reach this new gaming audience. In a 1999 interview, she declared, "If experiments are not done to find how to mainstream the genre or to make it more 'commercial' for today's audience, it will die … and then everybody loses." It's easy to criticise her now, but *Mask of Eternity* was released in the same year as the revered adventure classic *Grim Fandango* – and outsold it 2-to-1. **FE**

Septerra Core:
Legacy of the Creator



Valkyrie Studios, 1999
Windows, Linux and Mac

Septerra Core is a PC-only JRPG that comes from a very unexpected place: Chicago. It began in 1995 as the dream project of old-school otakus, inspired by JRPGs such as *Phantasy Star* and *Chrono Trigger*, as well as ’80s and ’90s sci-fi anime like *Iria: Zeiram*, *Dragon’s Heaven* and *Aura Battler Dunbine*.

The game is set on Septerra, a planet composed of seven layers, each with unique characteristics. You play as Maya, a scavenger from the second layer who saw her city destroyed by a general from the first layer.

Her adventures follow a decidedly JRPG-like formula (especially those of the SNES/PS1 era) of gathering companions, visiting exotic towns, exploring dungeons, travelling across a large overworld and even acquiring a late-game airship that allows you to travel freely.

That’s not to say there’s nothing new – *Septerra* features adventure game elements, with topic-based dialogues and puzzles that require you to combine items in your inventory. Some are fun, but others are poorly presented or require items that are very easy to miss.

Combat is similar to *Final Fantasy*’s ATB system, where characters wait for a bar to charge so they can act. Here the bar is divided into three segments – you can act with just one segment, but more segments allow more powerful attacks (similar to what *FFXIII* would use). Sadly, combat is slow. Very, very slow.

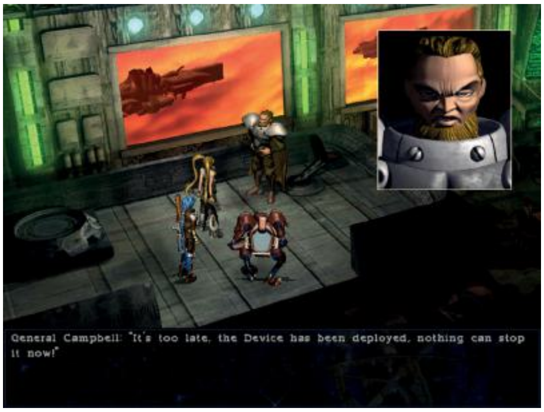
However, what really exacerbates the flaws in both the combat and puzzles are the game’s dungeons. They are massive, packed with enemies that respawn, and offer no challenge beyond pushing levers.

It combines terribly with the sluggish combat and confusing puzzles: some events can only be triggered by specific party members – going back to town to switch characters and returning can take a lot of time. And even if you know exactly what to do, you’ll often be forced to cross the same dungeon multiple times.

All this stretches what could be a very enjoyable 20–30 hour game into almost 60 hours. To speed things up, you can cheat to instantly win battles (and honestly, I advise doing so), but it’s still an endurance test.

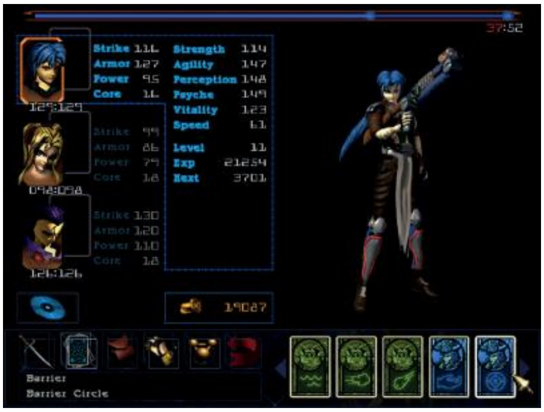
While it stands out for its “East meets West” DNA, *Septerra Core* is one of those games that people who played it at the time might have good memories of, given its flawed yet interesting story, but it’s hard to justify spending so many hours on it today. **FE**

Brian “BMAN” Babendererde, the game’s lead designer, wrote a post-mortem in 2020 that gives a detailed look at its troubled development, with many concept-art images, videos and internal documents.



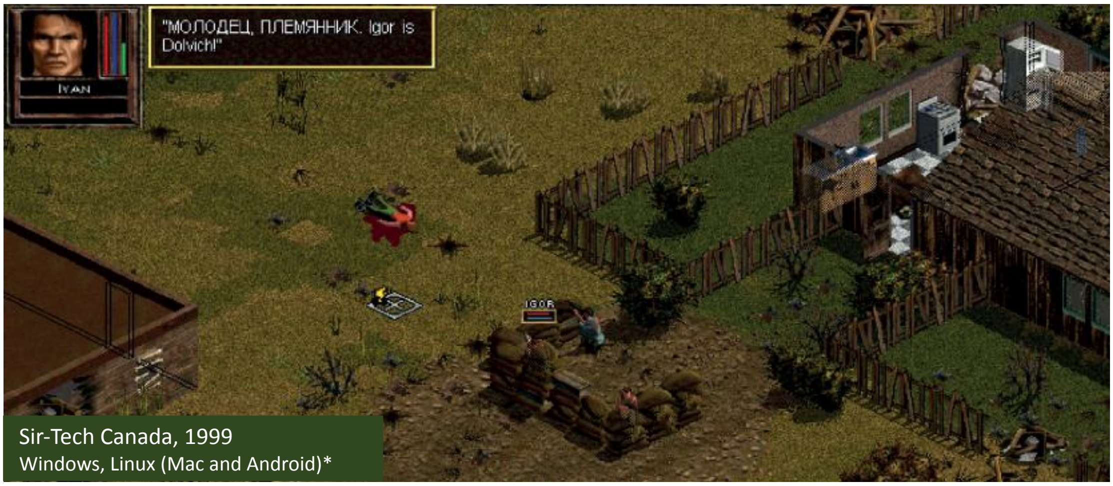
General Campbell: "It's too late, the Device has been deployed, nothing can stop it now!"

While the characters’ designs are an uncanny emulation of the Japanese style, the pre-rendered backgrounds are nice and the game’s dialogues are fully voiced



Magic and Summons are cast by combining cards you find during the game; they require mana, which is shared between party members

Jagged Alliance 2



Sir-Tech Canada, 1999
Windows, Linux (Mac and Android)*

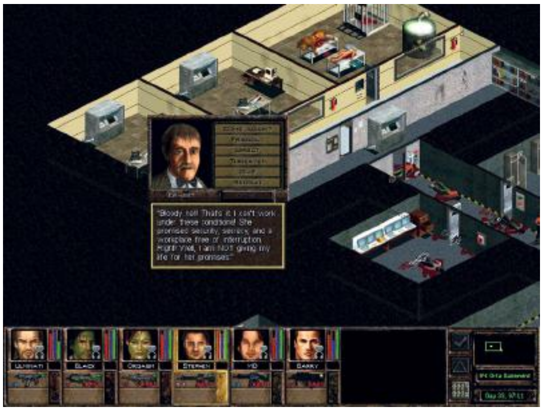
***Since the release of the source code, dedicated modders have managed to create ports of the game for Mac and Android.**

Jagged Alliance 2 is an isometric turn-based strategy game in which you hire and command a band of mercenaries in order to free a fictional country called Arulco from the rule of its ruthless dictator, Queen Deidranna. Or is it?

Reassessment and reflection occurs each time I'm asked what *JA2* is. I've seen people drawn to this game for all possible reasons, from professional soldiers loving its strategic layer to gun nuts drooling over the immense arsenal available, expanded even further by mods. Others praise the game for a creative, alchemical approach to the RPG genre and its chess-like tactical depth. Some just love the characters.

Indeed, *Jagged Alliance 2* is generous enough to allow you to enjoy it from all perspectives and playstyles. If you want to treat it as an isometric shooter, one-man team, fine, there's enough action for every Rambo out there; if you want to instead take an armed stroll and explore the country, you'll have a laugh, and a whale of a time too.

Such flexibility is achieved through this unique blend of strategy and role-playing game.



Beyond just fighting, you'll also have to talk to the locals and decide how to handle the issues they present

You start by creating a custom avatar, then recruiting a minimal team of mercs – each with their own stats, gear, personalities and weekly salaries – then go straight to work. Your team is inserted into the Omerta village, where the army is about to assault the rebel hideout. You are to clear the initial sector, deliver your letter of credentials to Fatima, a local contact, and be led to meet the rebel leader.

Your dialogue skills will be used for the first time here, giving you the chance to recruit rebels into your squad and place the sector under your control, making it clear that *JA2* offers much more than "just" incredibly deep tactical combat.

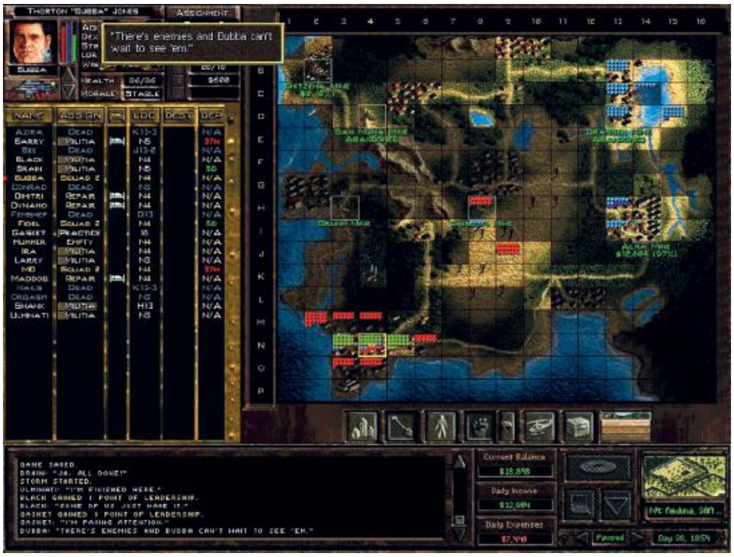
After Omerta, you gain access to the world map and can plan your next steps. There's the "normal" route of liberating the town of Drassen, gaining control of its resources and assigning your mercs to train a militia that will defend it from Deidranna's army (you can also find the local helicopter pilot and weapons dealer there). But you can try alternative routes, especially during a replay. A 7.62 mm bullet might stop you, but the game won't.

In each of the main sectors you also get to indulge in a bit of RPG exploring and questing. Benefits can lie hidden in any cupboard or dialogue option. It's where the kindred spirit with the Fallout series is most evident in *JA2* – whether you fight for cash in San Mona or rescue a hooker from a brothel, quests are fun, rewarding and not at all politically correct.

Depending on how close you get to the capital, or how irate Deidranna gets with your actions, the game throws a range of enemies at you, rising in difficulty from "yellow shirts" – the local police – through army "red shirt" regulars, and ending with the "black shirt" special forces, who bring everything to the table: snipers, LMGs, mortars, even tanks.

"Even though it wasn't the focal part of the game, I found some of the NPCs to be the coolest part – especially watching people theorise on how the game worked in this respect. Whether it be Pablo, Kingpin, Deidranna or any other NPC, there was more talk about this aspect of the game than the actual combat. And I'm happy with that; the combat in *JA* is a given, so it's the 'extras' that I get off on."

– Ian Currie,
JA2's director and producer

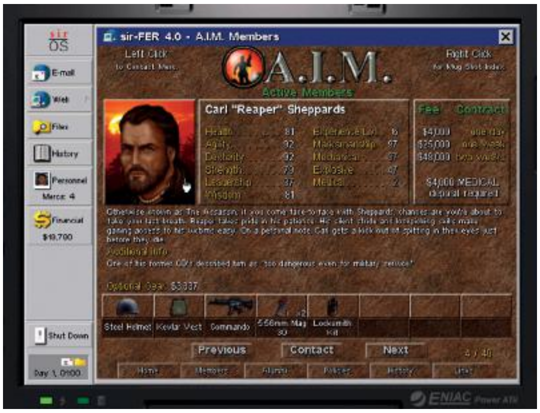


You can control multiple squads at once, and train militias to defend liberated sectors once you've earned the support of the locals

The final layer of the cake is the amazing turn-based combat. Powered by an elegant UI, a large pool of action points per unit and many nuances like cover, stances, aimed shots, morale, wounds, field of view, multiple ammo types and even destructible buildings, the wealth of options available is staggering.

The day-night cycle enhances stealth and the game provides both the tools (knives, camouflage, silenced weapons, wire cutters) and the skills required. If that's not your cup of tea, you can get a Dragunov sniper rifle and pop heads from across the map. Or set the world on fire with LAWs, mortars and LMGs. Or maybe play Ironman (and/or solo!) and try to carve your way to victory for massive bragging rights. *JA2* will keep bringing you back, no matter what.

Finally, if you're looking for an alternative twist, you can also activate the Sci-Fi mode, a special mode in which a new faction of enemies is added to the mix – which can lead to chaotic 3-way battles.



More than just stats, gear and salaries, each unit has its unique personality, delivered via hundreds of voiced lines

Two years after the game's release, we got the *JA2: Unfinished Business* expansion. Its new campaign was short and left you hungry for more, but the game also brought a map editor, giving official blessing to a modding community that, many years later, still produces fresh content for the game.

The sales of *Unfinished Business* failed to keep Sir-Tech alive and ended prematurely one of the greatest TBS/RPG series ever made. Yet, like the bite of a vampire, it made the game immortal, leaving its future to be safeguarded by its dedicated fan community. **SH**

After Sir-Tech closed, many companies tried to make sequels to *JA2*, such as *JA: Back in Action*, *JA: Flashback* and *JA: Online*, but sadly none of them come close to *JA2* v1.13.

Mods for Jagged Alliance 2

JA2 v1.13: A must-have mod, v1.13 brings thousands of new features and items to the game, changing the AI and interface, adding weather, suppressing fire, etc. It transformed *JA2* into a mod-friendly game, leading to many impressive new features, such as multiplayer.

JA2 Urban Chaos: The very first fan-made sequel of *JA2* offers a completely new adventure in Danubia, with revolutionary changes to systems and tactics.

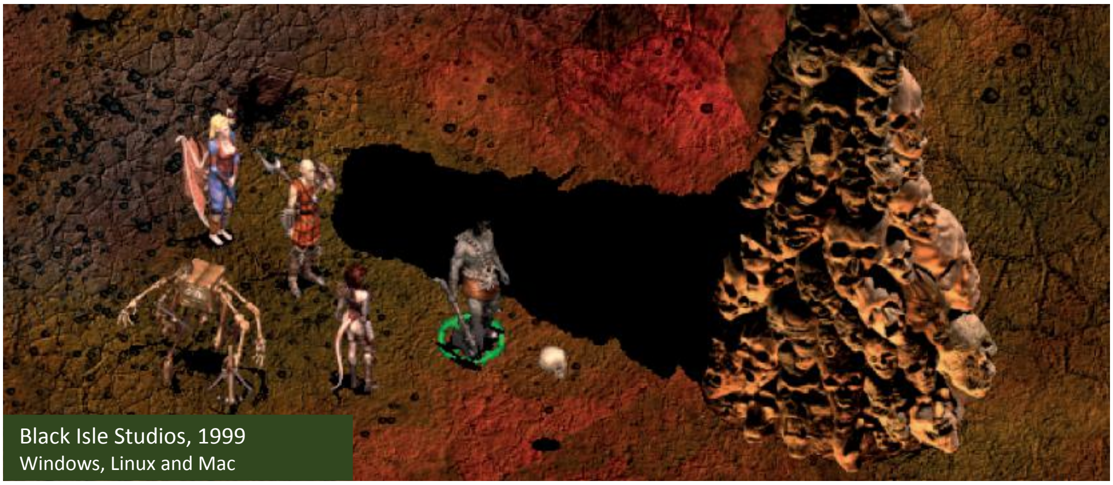
JA2 Stracciatella: An overhaul of the *JA2* source code, started by modder Tron, transforming the engine into a true platform-independent piece of software. It allowed ports of *JA2* to Linux, MacOS and Android.

Mods for Jagged Alliance 2: Unfinished Business

JA2UB Vietnam SOG'69: BecomingX's campaign lands you in Vietnam, together with some very interesting new characters. One of the most-played *UB* mods.

JA2UB Shady Job: This Russian mod turns *JA2:UB* into a whole new game, with a new tactical map, new markets, new characters and new weapons.

Planescape: Torment

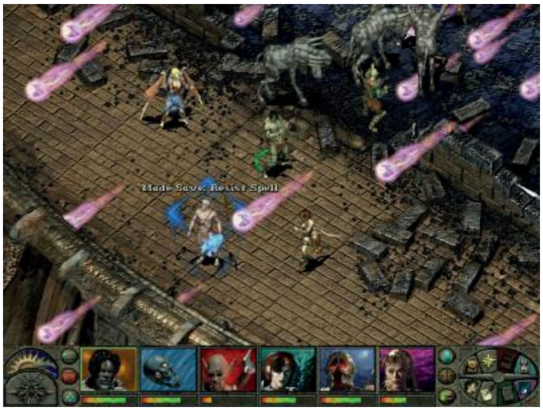


Black Isle Studios, 1999
Windows, Linux and Mac

As with the *Baldur's Gate* and *Icewind Dale* games, in 2017 Beamdog released an Enhanced Edition of *PS:T*, porting it to modern platforms, adding HD support and recruiting Chris Avellone to help restore some cut content.

Most fantasy RPGs follow the tried and allegedly true formula, which strips them of anything "fantastic" and grounds them in the dull "reality" of the familiar. Sadly, the much coveted instant recognition usually means instantly forgettable. How many times should we save an utterly predictable and generic world before it gets really old? Why is that when we see a town on the horizon, it's not a place of wonder and strange customs, but a place to restock on a FedEx quest and trade in your loot?

Now compare it to *Planescape: Torment*. You wake up in a mortuary. Dead. A gravity-defying skull starts chatting with you, making it clear that you aren't in fantasy Kansas anymore. The rules are completely different and you have no idea what they are yet. Where are the familiar elves and orcs – the foundation of quality storytelling? Why isn't an ancient evil stirring? Where is a kind lord of the realm to send you on a mission of great importance? Why isn't your character a dashing young hero, destined to be awesome, but a scarred, formaldehyde-soaked corpse, cursed with immortality?



The real-time-with-pause combat is the weakest aspect of the game, but the unique spells and the exotic monsters help keep it interesting

You open the door. Zombies are crawling everywhere, yet it's not a zombie apocalypse. The zombies mind their own business; in fact, they are nothing but indentured workers whose bodies were sold to the Dustmen, one of the many colourful factions in the game. You can attack the zombies if you're a creature of habit, but you can also walk around, studying the undead, and even get very unusual items from them.

When you finally manage to leave the mortuary, you find yourself in a most unusual city. It's a city of doors, filled with hidden portals that can take you anywhere, assuming you have the right key – which can be anything from a jewel to literally junk.

You make your way to a bar: a familiar place in this strange land. The very first thing you see is a burning (yet still living) man floating in mid-air – a rather unusual decorative conversation piece. Some ugly-looking demons are having a drink, greeting you as an old friend. The bartender casually informs you that he still has your eye – it's right there, floating in a jar like a pickled egg – and if you have some coins you can have it back.

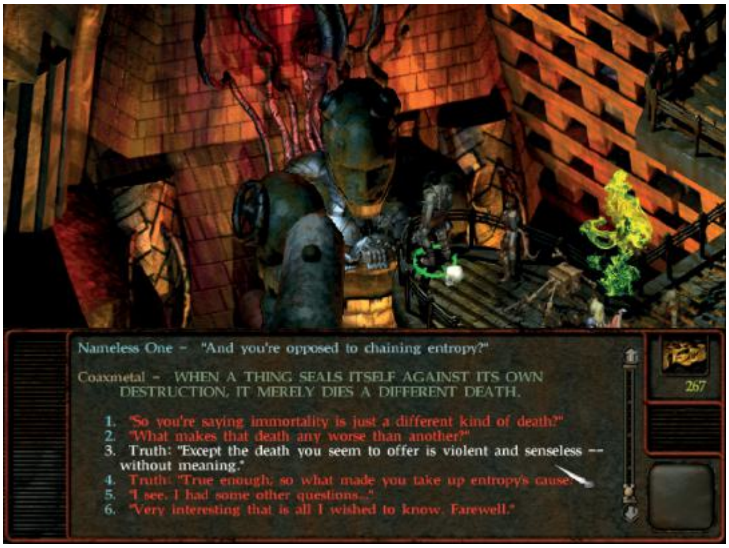
You buy the eye, not because you need it, but because it's so shockingly different from the usual selection of RPG goodies, wondering what the hell one does with an eye that belonged to your earlier incarnation. Guess what, you get an option to rip out one of your current, perfectly good eyeballs and replace it with the pickled one, because why not?

Somehow it works and your old memories start pouring in. At this point you're absolutely lost. You, the player, are a stranger in a strange land and that's a rare and precious moment in gaming.

Overall, *Planescape: Torment* is a beautifully written RPG that shines in every single area that involves writing.

"I looked at all the RPGs I had played up to that point, identified all the things I was tired of seeing and just looked for new ways to get around them. It just seemed like loading your game up after death was a huge waste of time. Ideally you just want the player to play until they feel like quitting, and so it occurred to me that if I made an immortal character, and made death a part of the game and mechanics, that it would be a more enjoyable experience for players instead of the standard save, die, and reload."

– *Chris Avellone,* Torment*'s lead designer*



Nameless One – "And you're opposed to chaining entropy?"

Coaxmetal – WHEN A THING SEALS ITSELF AGAINST ITS OWN DESTRUCTION, IT MERELY DIES A DIFFERENT DEATH.

1. "So you're saying immortality is just a different kind of death?"
2. "What makes that death any worse than another?"
3. Truth: "Except the death you seem to offer is violent and senseless -- without meaning."
4. Truth: "True enough; so what made you take up entropy's cause?"
5. "I see. I had some other questions..."
6. "Very interesting that is all I wished to know. Farewell."

Torment's writing is unrivalled in gaming, offering plenty of role-playing options, memorable moments, funny lines and overarching philosophical questions

You'll travel an interesting world (while the setting is a licensed oddity, it takes considerable skill and talent to turn an obscure, dusty IP into a one-of-a-kind world ready to be explored). You'll read a great story with philosophical undertones – a rare treat in videogames. You'll meet the best party members I've ever seen in a computer game, and you'll have fantastic dialogues from complex dialogue trees.

On the downside, despite featuring over 800,000 words, you have to fight a lot because apparently killing things to level up (and grinding to put more points into Wisdom and Charisma to unlock more awesome dialogues) is what players can't get enough of.

All this mindless slaughter is powered by the rather underwhelming real-time-with-pause (RTwP) system of the Infinity Engine. On the plus side, it has spectacular spell animations inspired by *Final Fantasy VII*, so if you get bored watching toons whacking each other, cast one of the spells and watch the fireworks.

Speaking of *Final Fantasy*, it can be argued that *Planescape: Torment*'s, um, homage to Japanese RPGs goes a bit deeper than the spell effects and that it is, in fact, a JRPG cleverly disguised as a WRPG to confuse players who are too cool to play console games.

Fortunately, the story, dialogue and characters are so good that, even if you hate RTwP with passion or laugh at people who cried when Aeris died, you'll still love the game and wish you could lose your memories and experience it all over again for the first time. **VD**

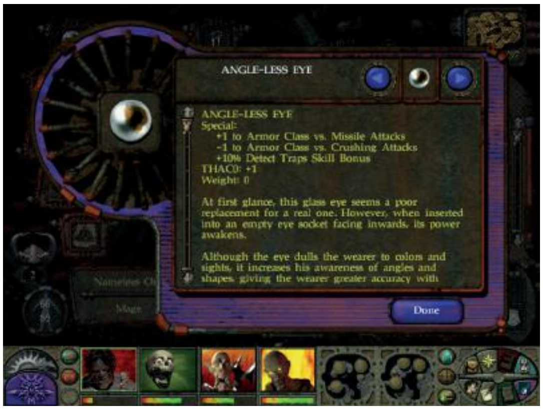
Mods:

Ultimate WeiDU Fixpack: Fixes hundreds of bugs.

Bigg's Widescreen mod: Allows you to run the game in any resolution you desire. If you install this, then also get *Ghostdog's incredible UI* mod to fix the menus.

Qwinn's Unfinished Business: Restores several quests, items and dialogues that were cut during development.

Black Isle tried developing two other *Planescape* games, both of which were eventually cancelled. One of them would have been a PlayStation game inspired by *King's Field*, to be directed by Colin McComb.



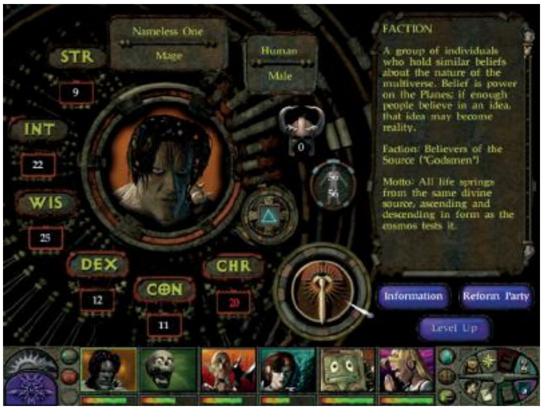
ANGLE-LESS EYE

ANGLE-LESS EYE
Special:
+1 to Armor Class vs. Missile Attacks
-1 to Armor Class vs. Crushing Attacks
+10% Detect Traps Skill Bonus
THAC0: +1
Weight: 0

At first glance, this glass eye seems a poor replacement for a real one. However, when inserted into an empty eye socket facing inwards, its power awakens.

Although the eye dulls the wearer to colors and sights, it increases his awareness of angles and shapes giving the wearer greater accuracy with

You won't buy armour in shops – instead, you'll get tattoos, unlock memories, learn secrets and replace body parts



FACTION

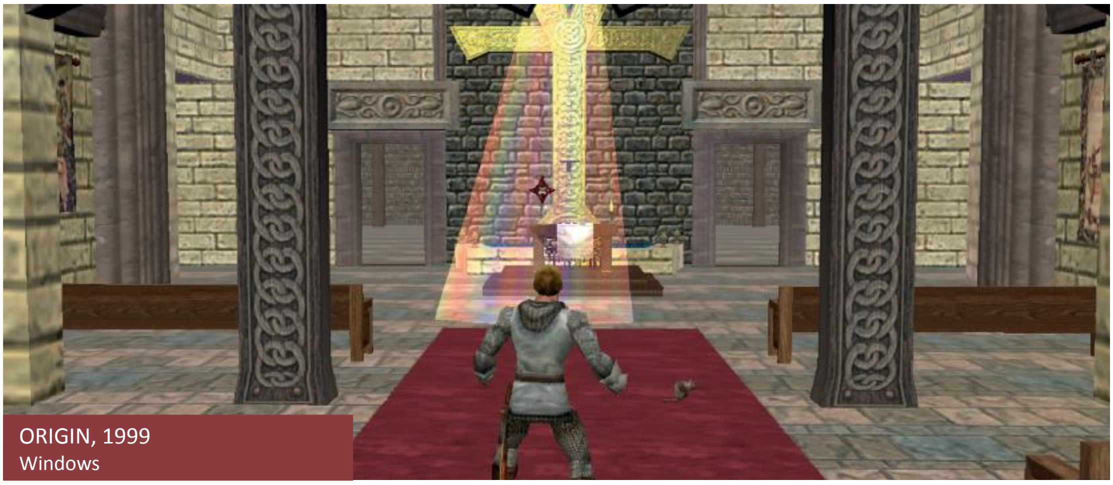
A group of individuals who hold similar beliefs about the nature of the multiverse. Belief is power on the Planes; if enough people believe in an idea, that idea may become reality.

Faction: Believers of the Source ("Godsmen")

Motto: All life springs from the same divine source, ascending and descending in form as the cosmos tests it.

It's advised that you play as a wise and intelligent mage – not because of his power, but because of his dialogues

Ultima IX: Ascension



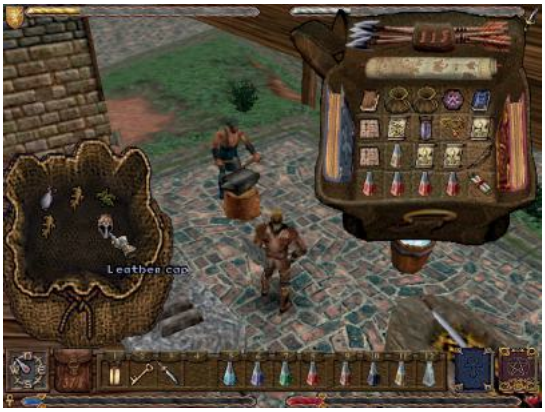
ORIGIN, 1999
Windows

Around the time *Ultima IX* was released, Richard Garriott hinted at the possibility of remaking the entire Ultima series using the *Ultima IX* engine, releasing the games as online episodes. Shortly afterwards, Garriott departed from Origin and the project was canned.

Ultima IX, published over 16 years ago, is the last single-player *Ultima*, and the conclusion of both the Age of Armageddon trilogy (which began with *Ultima VII*) and the story of the Avatar. It's also the most controversial entry in the series; no other *Ultima* game has so sharply and clearly divided the opinions of the fanbase.

Development on *Ultima IX* began soon after the release of *Ultima VIII*, with Mike McShaffry as the project lead at the time. An enhanced version of the *Ultima VIII* engine was selected as the technological base for the game, which McShaffry soon converted from a 2D engine to a software-accelerated 3D engine. However, he was soon removed from the project.

It would have been after his departure that the well-known Bob White Plot was written, likely based on Richard Garriott's own designs for the plot of the game (a leaked version can be read online on websites such as the Ultima Codex and the Ultima Wiki). At the time, EA felt the game worthy of significant investment; many of the CGI cutscenes used in the final game were rendered around this time.



Ultima IX's inventory is still based on multiple containers, but they are now grid-based, making them much easier to organise

However, much of the team was reassigned to assist with completing *Ultima Online*, and work largely paused on *Ultima IX* until mid-1997. Much had changed in the intervening months: hardware-accelerated 3D had taken off, and it was decided that *Ultima IX* should make use of this new technology.

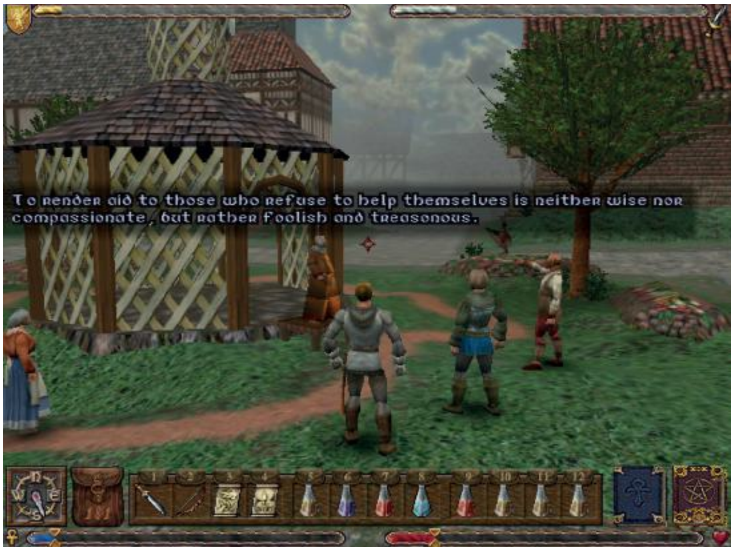
A new team was hired, and Ed Del Castillo was brought over from Westwood Studios to serve as the game's producer. He rewrote the plot treatment significantly, but was soon dismissed from Origin Systems. With pressure from EA to cancel the game and focus on *Ultima Online* mounting, Richard Garriott took direct control of the project, and the plot was rewritten once more. EA gradually removed funding and resources from the *Ultima IX* team, and eventually imposed a firm release deadline which left the team scrambling to complete a playable build of the game. With only weeks to spare, a playable build was achieved, and the game was greenlit for release.

Upon release, *Ultima IX* was – as might be expected given the above – very buggy and unstable, so much so that Origin Systems opted to re-release an updated version of the game on new CDs to all who had purchased it.

The game was also heavily criticised for paying little heed to the canon of the *Ultima* series; the ending of *Ultima VIII* and many other key events from the series were ignored or rewritten, upsetting fans who had followed the *Ultima* lore for almost two decades. Other common complaints included that it lacked party members, that the game world felt overly small, that combat was crude, the plot limited, the dialogue unpolished and the voice acting poor.

There is validity to all of these criticisms. There was little time during the race to finish the game for designers and editors to revisit the written dialogue.

> “He [Richard Garriott] wanted Britannia to come alive. And we did our best to do that. We had birds that actually flew out of trees and went and had a place for their nest, and they sat back in their nest. We had all kinds of cool features to just make the world come alive. And the amount of effort that took robbed us of the ability to put in a lot of the more traditional RPG elements, like a party, like NPC schedules, like who owns what object, like crafting ...”
>
> – *Bill Randolph,*
> Ultima IX*’s lead programmer*



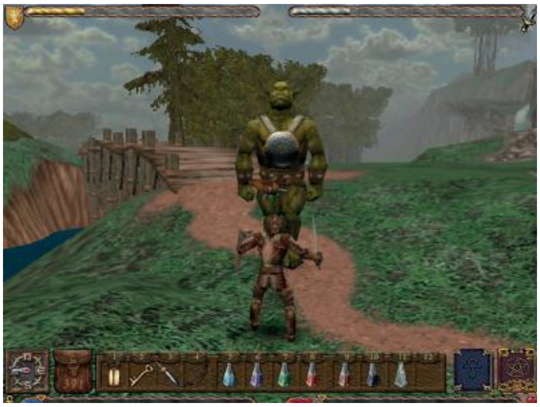
To render aid to those who refuse to help themselves is neither wise nor compassionate, but rather foolish and treasonous.

The game’s plot revolves around the corruption of the Virtues by the Guardian, who raised mysterious black columns all over Britannia

Designers would often write a scene and hand their first-draft script directly to the audio producer, who would get the actor(s) involved to record it that day. The game’s technology and scripting were very complex for their day, and more polish was required than Origin had time to apply.

And yet, *Ultima IX* was – and in some ways remains – a technical marvel. It features a fully open 3D world, and offers some of the best dungeons to be found in the *Ultima* series. Many objects in the world can be freely manipulated, and container objects (e.g. barrels) even have buoyancy. These are features that largely disappeared from 3D RPG design for about a decade after *Ultima IX*’s release.

Ultima IX also brings the story of the Avatar and the Guardian to a satisfying end, and drives home the now commonly accepted point that, ultimately, it was the Avatar who was the cause of many of the misfortunes that befell Britannia.



Combat in *Ultima IX* is simplistic; most of the time you’ll just hit the left-mouse button as fast as you can

Despite its reception, *Ultima IX* is not without a legacy. German RPG developers Piranha Bytes drew significant inspiration from the game whilst developing *Gothic* (2001) and, later, *Risen* (2009); both games improve upon the formula that Origin Systems never had the time to fully develop, and are classics in their own right.

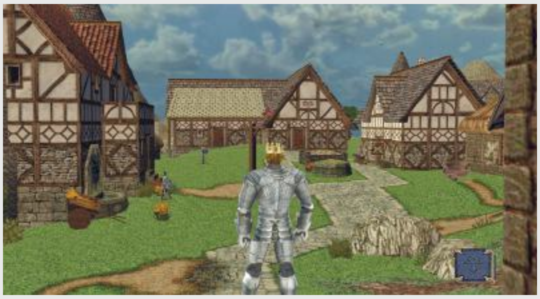
For me, personally, there was one other thing that *Ultima IX* offered. You see, I grew up playing *Ultima*. I love the series and its setting; Britannia was my Narnia, my magical land hidden just out of view. And in *Ultima IX*, finally, I could see its sky. **KE**

Mods:

Dialogue patch: A re-writing of the game’s dialogue, to better fit the lore and continuity of the *Ultima* series.

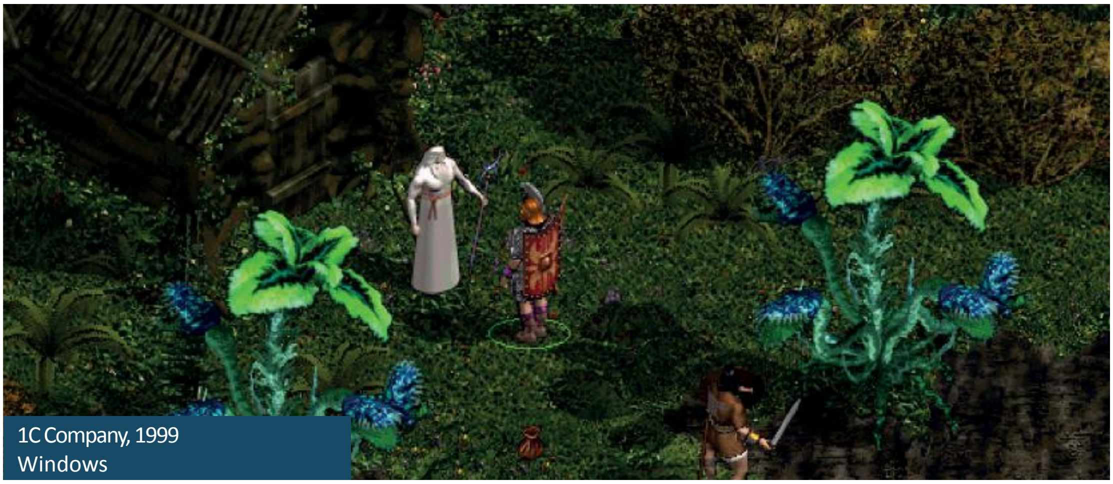
Forgotten World: Provides several patches and updates for *Ultima IX*, improving its performance, fixing some of the remaining bugs and restoring some of the content cut late in the game’s production.

Beautiful Britannia: improves the game’s textures and adds several areas that were cut from the game.



A screenshot of a modded *Ultima IX*, with enhanced graphics, wide-screen support and restored content

Konung:
Legend of the North



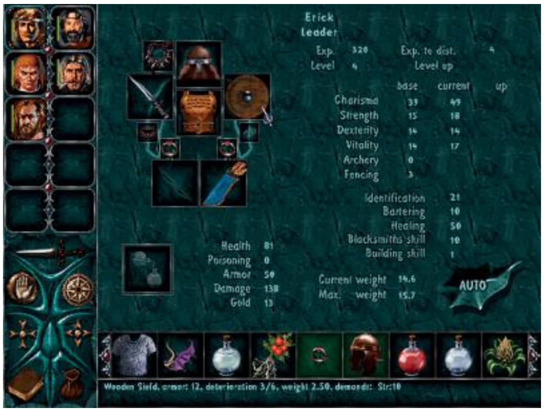
1C Company, 1999
Windows

To understand the importance of *Konung: Legend of The North* for Russian gamers, you need to understand the game market back then. At the time, Russia did not have its own companies like Apple or Microsoft, or game developers like Sierra or Activision. We never had such things as arcade galleries or mass-market consoles. In Japan and the US, gaming culture was built brick by brick – it was an evolutionary process; in Russia, they kinda started building it from the 15th floor – it was a revolution.

Konung only supports 640 × 480 or 800 × 600 resolutions, but there are several mods that allow play in widescreen.

It began in the early '90s: NES consoles appeared in shops, but under a bizarre name – "Dendy". This was an unauthorised copy, yet it ran all NES games. Official game distributors of that time did not see Russia as a serious region for doing business, but some enthusiasts realized that the depressive period and baby boom which followed the fall of the USSR required something to entertain people – and it must be cheap.

Fast forward to the late '90s. A PC still costs a fortune, but pirate games are sold in open-air bazaars. In 1997, I bought *Dungeon Keeper* and *Quake II* on the same day for 30 rubles (about a dollar, back then).



Erick
Leader
Exp. 320 Exp. to dist. 4
Level 4 Level up

	base	current	up
Charisma	33	49	
Strength	15	18	
Dexterity	14	14	
Vitality	14	17	
Archery	0		
Fencing	3		

Identification 21
Bartering 10
Healing 50
Blacksmiths skill 10
Building skill 1

Health 81
Poisoning 0
Armor 50
Damage 138
Gold 13

Current weight 14.6
Max. weight 15.7

Wooden Sield, armor: 12, deterioration 3/6, weight 2.50, demands: Str:10

Konung has four classes – Hunter, Warrior, Leader and Merchant.; each comes with different stats, but since Charisma defines the number of companions you can have, a high Charisma Leader is by far the most viable option

Licensed original games were also available but very rare – big box editions only, all very expensive and without any Russian localisation. Though the quality of pirate translations was often mediocre at best, it was just as important for many gamers as the price.

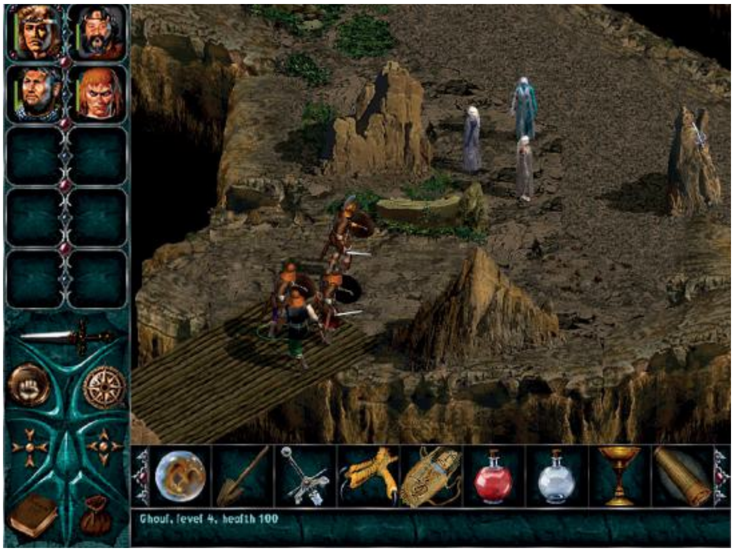
In 1999, Russian publisher Buka Entertainment figured out a way to fight piracy: a new format called "jewel case" – a game CD case without the big box, at the price of a pirate CD. It was another revolution, and quickly all other local publishers followed this scheme. *Konung: Legend of the North* was one of the games that came out in this format. It was cheap, guaranteed to work and it was a Russian-made game about Russian culture. The beautiful arrangement blew our minds.

Konung tells a story about a lost artefact which was shattered into three pieces and must be put back together. These pieces were scattered across the fictional Forest Land and must first be found. You play as one of three heroes who has received a message about this issue and a piece of the artefact; one is from Byzantium, the second is a Viking, and the last is a local Slavic hunter who shot down a raven that was carrying the artefact to a completely different person.

It is obvious that *Konung* was an attempt to make a Slavic *Diablo*. It has real-time battles in which the most important thing is teamwork, but the AI of your party members is really passive, so without specific commands your friends will do nothing except watch you die. You can't select all your henchmen with a frame as in an RTS. Instead, you have to give orders individually – or use one of two commands: "everyone to me" and "attack", which are quite limited and won't let you know exactly where the party will go or whom exactly they will attack. So, unlike *Diablo*, fighting in *Konung* is just not fun – it's mostly pain and frustration.

"The game sold over 40,000 copies in the first weekend, which was a blast. It was being distributed not only in cheap 'jewel cases' – it also had a big-box edition. The hype around this game was so wild that the employees working in the production department were unable to keep up with the tempo of the sales. So basically everyone from the dev team was involved in packing those big boxes."

– Nikolay Baryshnikov,
Konung*'s Lead Writer*
and 1C Entertainment*'s* CEO



Combat in *Konung* is brutal – you won't survive alone and your companions will likely die often, but by rebuilding settlements, you can get traders, healers and blacksmiths to train more companions for you

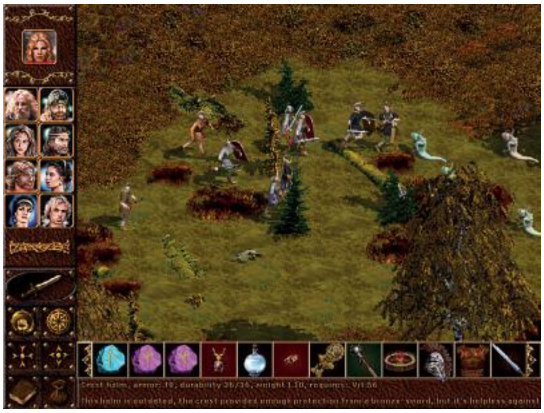
Konung has its original touches though: you will find abandoned or destroyed settlements that can be rebuilt and repopulated. The sad part is that you can't do much at these settlements – mostly they serve as hubs for free healing and weapon repair. Still, they are important to limit backtracking, since fast travel spells are expensive and everything is really slow. The only way to speed things up is to speed up the whole game. It helps while travelling, but in combat you will most likely lose control over your character and his companions.

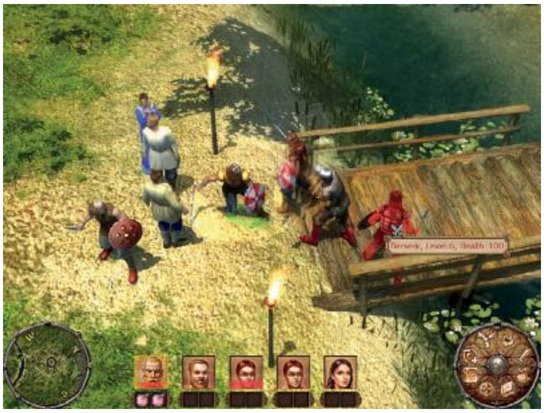
Aside from that, the audiovisual part of *Konung* cuts both ways. The game has beautiful landscapes with high birch trees and a day-night cycle, which was impressive for the time. The monsters were inspired by Russian folklore and they made an impression back then, as did the beautifully painted national clothes and armour – but all of it was ruined by poor animations. The soundtrack is also weird, wobbling from romantic folk-related tunes to some kind of lo-fi techno.

All in all, *Konung* was a cute and heart-warming game for us as Russian kids. Even though we already had games like *Fallout* and *Baldur's Gate*, we couldn't help but fall in love with this weird and frustrating, but somehow charming, game. However, I don't even want to imagine how playing it today would feel to somebody from beyond Russia and its context.

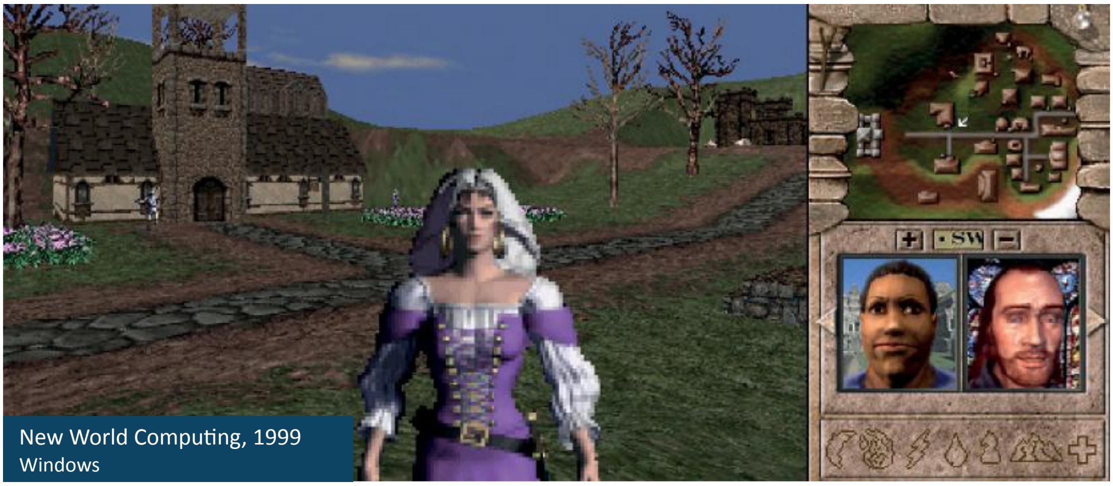
Back in the day, *Konung* was a huge local success, getting two sequels. *Konung 2: Blood of Titans* (2003) polished the original's gameplay, added more classes and skills, and provided the option of travelling by ship. The third game, *Konung 3: Ties of the Dynasty* (2009), moved to full 3D graphics but failed to match the expectations of even the most patriotic gamers. Symbolically, after a decade of existence, the *Konung* series saw the rise of Russian game development and its inglorious fall, which was followed by years of hiatus and experienced PC and console developers leaving to work in social and mobile gaming. **PS**

A fan-made prequel to *Konung 2* called *The Legend Continues* was created in 2004. Set after the events of the first game, it was officially published by 1C, but only in Russia.


Konung 2 greatly improved the gameplay by providing better party control and reducing backtracking


Konung 3 failed to match the expectations of gamers who already had *Star Wars: KotOR*, *Mass Effect*, etc.

Might and Magic VII: For Blood and Honor

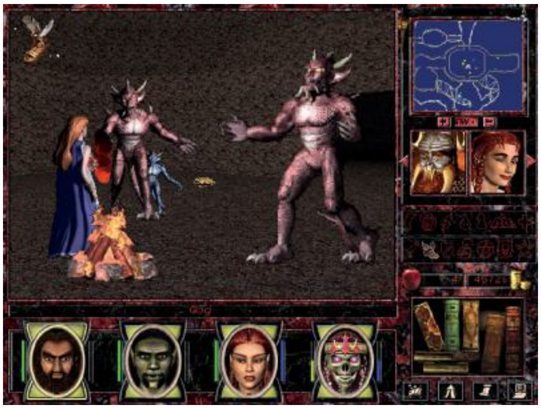


New World Computing, 1999
Windows

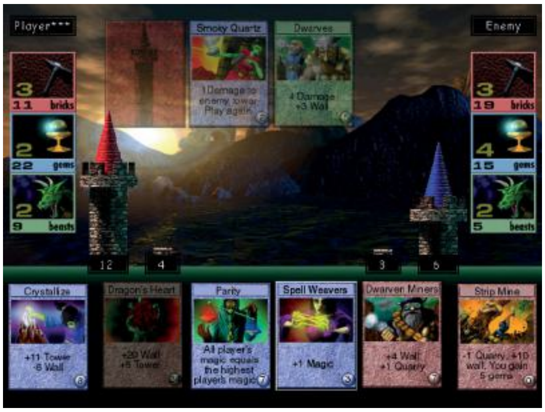
A fan of *Might and Magic VII,* such as myself, might tell you that the game takes everything the previous game did and improves on it. Sculpting mechanics into perfection, tweaking the skill system, adding depth and polish – all within a world more vibrant and interesting than ever.

More traditionalist players will tell you that the decline of the series began here, because while *M&M VII* has more polished content, it also has less of it.

The *GrayFace MM7* patch adds features like mouse-look, while the *Maestro* mod is a big pack with new quests, classes, races, bosses and HD textures, plus options for higher resolution.



Your faction choice greatly changes the game's second half, including its interface.; side with evil, and you can even become a lich!


Player
Enemy
3
11 bricks
2
22 gems
2
9 beasts
3
19 bricks
4
15 gems
2
5 beasts
Smoky Quartz
1 Damage to enemy tower Play again
Dwarves
4 Damage +3 Wall
12
4
3
6
Crystallize
+11 Tower -6 Wall
Dragon's Heart
+20 Wall +8 Tower
Parity
All player's magic equals the highest player's magic
Spell Weavers
+1 Magic
Dwarven Miners
+4 Wall +1 Quarry
Strip Mine
-1 Quarry, +10 wall. You gain 5 gems

The Arcomage card game was so popular it got a stand-alone release in 2000, as well as inspiring various open-source copies, such as *MArcomage*

The game compromises on the magnificent dungeons of the previous game by making its own less prevalent and less sprawling. With less breadth of content comes more depth, however. Everything you do here is meatier, denser and more fine-tuned. There is more monster variety, more mechanical complexity, more diverse rewards for exploration and more ways to customise your party.

You begin the game as in *M&M VI*, creating your blob of four adventurers, but with an expanded catalogue of classes, races and skills. Then comes a rare treat in an RPG: a genuinely interesting tutorial area that ties naturally into the rest of the game.

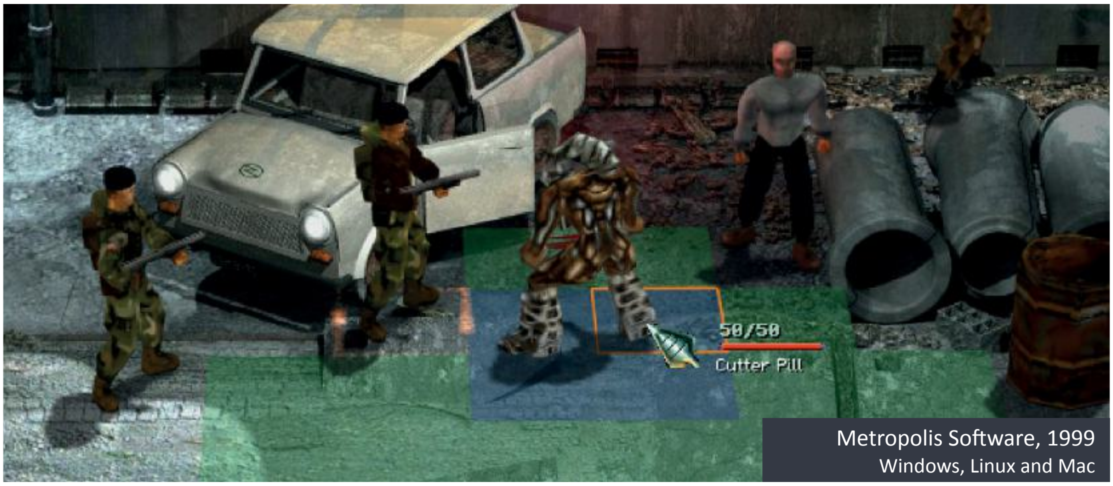
Rather than shove you down a content-tube, Emerald Island is a micro-cosmos of the actual game, with its own dangerous swamp, a small township, quests, dungeons, a choice that will affect you much later in the game and even a menacing dragon!

The game also features perhaps the best mini-game in RPG history. Before *Witcher 3*'s *Gwent* there was *Arcomage*, a decidedly deeper and more balanced trading card game that is still played in online, multiplayer lobbies today.

M&M VII even makes room for a bit of role-playing, among other things presenting you with a game-changing fork halfway through: join the angelic forces of Celeste or cast in your lot with the brutal fiends of The Pit. Depending on your choice, your characters earn different promotions and abilities, and the main quest line changes completely. Even the game's UI alters to reflect your decision.

In short, *Might and Magic VII: For Blood and Honor* might be the point where cracks start to show in the series, but it is also the series at its peak, developed using every lesson learned over the ten years since it began. **CG**

Gorky 17



Metropolis Software, 1999
Windows, Linux and Mac

Gorky 17 (also known as *Odium* on American shores) is a title I didn't mind replaying in order to write this review. The primary reason being that it's a short and sweet game.

The game places you in command of three NATO soldiers who are dropped into a secret military complex somewhere in Poland, with limited supplies and unsure about what they are getting into.

First thing to know: *Gorky 17* is tough. Healing consumables are very limited, and, if anyone in your party dies, you have to restart the battle or reload. The battle system is standard tactical phase-based RPG fare. During your turn, each character gets to Move, Select a Weapon/Item, Face a specific direction and Act (Shoot, Defend, Heal, etc.) in almost any order.

Many objects can explode or be pushed to form makeshift barricades, and the player must also consider factors such as obstacles, armour type, weapon ranges, directional facing and so on. For example, attacking a target from the sides or back will grant bonus damage. Additionally, various status effects eventually come into play. Combatants can be made 'Flammable' and subsequently be set aflame using a variety of weapons – or simple matches.

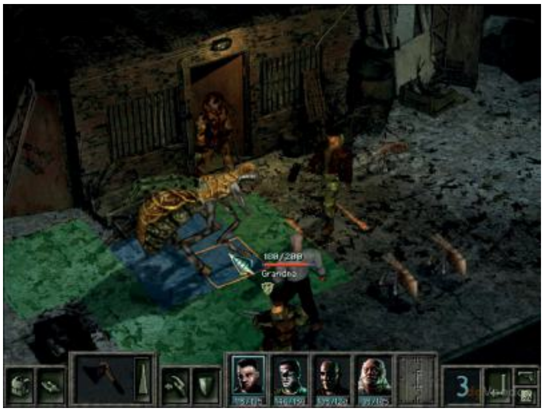
The typical enemy appears to come straight out of a cyberpunk nightmare. The AI is aggressive, but not suicidal, and even just one of these mutant creatures can be a serious threat. Then there are the monstrous bosses, each introduced by a short cinematic, and requiring different tactics.

Outside combat, the emphasis is on semi-linear exploration, character banter and item-collecting, as you solve light puzzles to move forward or reach hidden loot caches. Battles and events are all scripted, triggered at certain locations; resources are balanced to be scarce, making exploration rewarding.

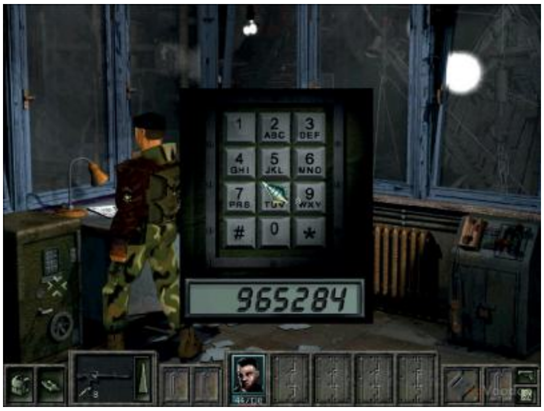
Your characters become more proficient the more they use a weapon, and every experience level grants five points to distribute in a handful of stats but, unfortunately, there isn't much gameplay deviation.

Still, *Gorky 17* offers a creative mix that few game publishers would dare produce nowadays, blending survival horror, light puzzles, RPG elements and old-school tactical combat in a tough, unforgiving package. Definitely worth the 20-hour playthrough. **MS**

Two other *Gorky* games exist: *Gorky Zero* and *Gorky Zero 2*. Both are third-person stealth action games, set around characters from *Gorky 17*.



The game has several special boss enemies, all of whom have unique abilities and require thoughtful approaches



The mix of pre-rendered backgrounds, light puzzles and horrible monsters gives *Gorky 17* a very *Resident Evil*-like tone

Omikron: The Nomad Soul

Quantic Dream, 1999
Windows and Dreamcast

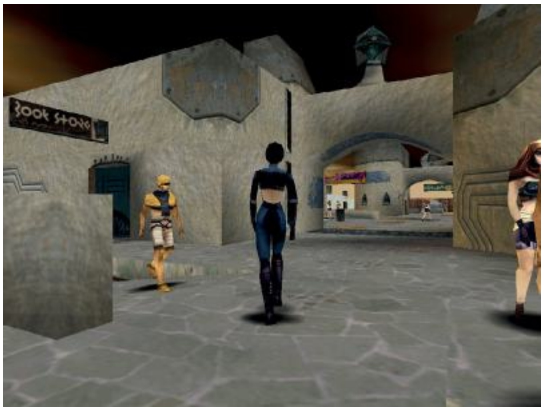
David Bowie and Reeves Gabrels composed *Omikron's* soundtrack, then later included some of the tracks in Bowie's 1999 album "Hours ...".

The names of David Cage and Quantic Dream are nowadays deeply tied to "cinematic experiences" – games like *Fahrenheit* (2005), *Heavy Rain* (2010), *Beyond: Two Souls* (2013) and *Detroit: Become Human* (2018), so heavily focused on storytelling that the gameplay almost vanishes, being mostly limited to QTEs and similarly discrete player inputs.

A shame, really, for what's arguably David Cage's finest offering lies in the exact opposite direction – in his very first game, *Omikron: The Nomad Soul*. An extremely ambitious amalgamation of several different gameplay modes, it's a title as bold as it's flawed.

Omikron begins with a police officer shattering the fourth wall and addressing the player directly. He is Kay'l, and he begs for help, asking you to send your soul through the computer to take over his body and help him save the dystopian city of Omikron.

As soon as you agree (because why not?), you enter the body of Kay'l and are transported to a dark alley – then instantly attacked by a demon. Barely surviving the assault, it's your task to figure out what the hell is going on around here.



The city of Omikron is divided into gated districts, but each area is large and full of locations to explore

Stepping out of the alley, the player is met by the cyberpunk vision of Omikron – a large, open city, complete with apartments and stores you can enter, driveable cars and even taxis – all this months before *Shenmue* and two years before *GTA III*.

As players try to take all this in, the opening credits begin to play, the camera travelling around the city, accompanied by David Bowie's eerie singing – a small taste of the excellent soundtrack he and Reeves Gabrels composed for the game.

While this all sounds ambitious enough already, *Omikron* goes much deeper. At first it plays like a 3D adventure game – you walk around the city, visiting your apartment and other locations in a search for clues, trying to understand what's going on.

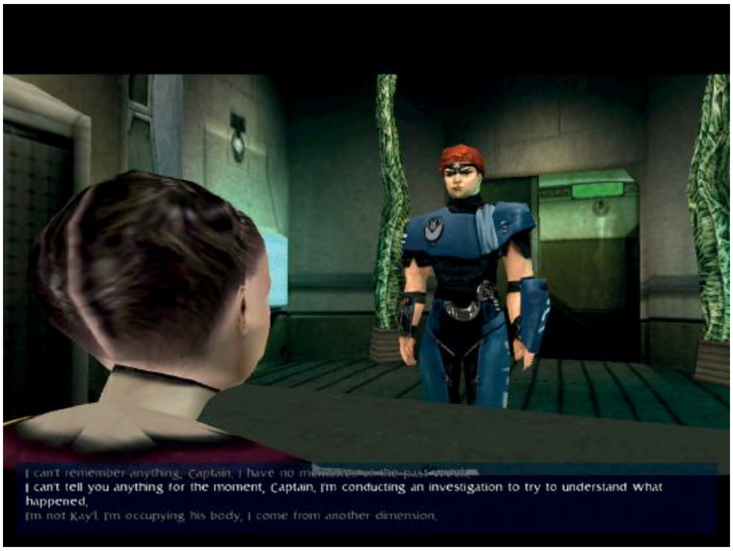
You'll talk to people, collect several items and solve a few puzzles. Then you'll be called to investigate a robbery in a supermarket, and, as soon as you enter it, the game shifts into a first-person shooter, with several weapon types, medpacks and a mini-map.

As you make your way through the robbers, you finally reach their boss – who disarms you, the game suddenly changing into a *Street Fighter*-like hand-to-hand fighting game, with combos and everything.

If fighting is too difficult, you can train at home, fight in arenas or buy potions to increase your stats. Moreover, the game's initial "soul transfer" isn't just a silly throwaway. You'll later unlock the ability to freely transfer your soul into any of over 20 characters' bodies across the city, each with their own stats, items (such as their apartment keys) and usefulness.

For example, the cyborg mercenary Jorg 722 is great for combat sections, but only Kay'l can freely walk around the police station. Of course, Cage also tries some moral dilemmas: as a soul in the body of Kay'l, is it right for you to have sex with his girlfriend?

> “Those [mixed gameplay genres] were a young game designer’s stupidities. Someone who had never made a game before and who thought, ‘Might as well do everything, why wouldn’t we do everything?’ That’s because we had never done it ourselves so we didn’t realise the scale of what we were writing, because we just didn’t have the experience. So it was an extremely ambitious game, which was incredibly painful to create – in totally, totally unreasonable proportions.”
>
> – *David Cage,* Omikron*’s director*



I can't remember anything, Captain. I have no [illegible]

I can't tell you anything for the moment, Captain. I'm conducting an investigation to try to understand what happened.

I'm not Kay'l. I'm occupying his body. I come from another dimension.

While some dialogue choices may impact future events and dialogues, most of the choices are purely for flavour

This unique soul mechanic is even used to avoid Game Overs. Dying does not mean losing the game, as you can often possess other characters to continue. In fact, there are certain characters who can only be obtained by dying in certain events.

Speaking of events, players exploring the city’s many pubs might come across a virtual David Bowie performing in choreographed concerts, singing songs such as *Survive* and *Something in the Air*.

Together with great music, David Cage’s passion for cinematography is on full display; the game’s dynamic camera angles, used during cutscenes and dialogues, feel very “cinematic”, ahead of their time.

Unfortunately, behind such a massive project lie equally large flaws. *Omikron* has several gameplay modes, but none of them is well-developed. The fighting and shooting sections quickly grow repetitive, while the adventure parts are too simplistic and fail to explore the game’s soul-transfer mechanic.

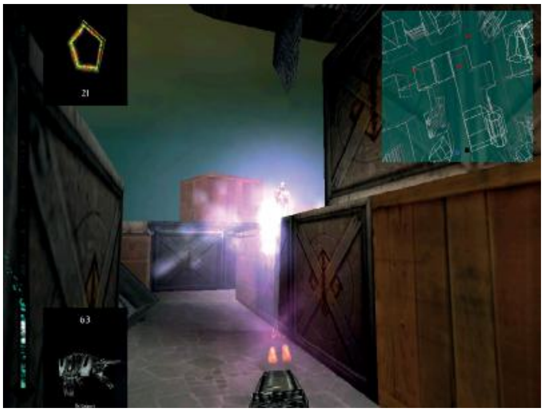
While the presentation still holds, in part due to the excellent voice acting, the controls and interface are horribly dated. Mouse control is limited to the FPS sections, leaving you with “tank-controls” and a clunky keyboard-driven inventory for most of the game.

In usual Quantic Dream fashion, the story starts out interesting, but eventually becomes an unintelligible mess, adding to the disappointment later in the game.

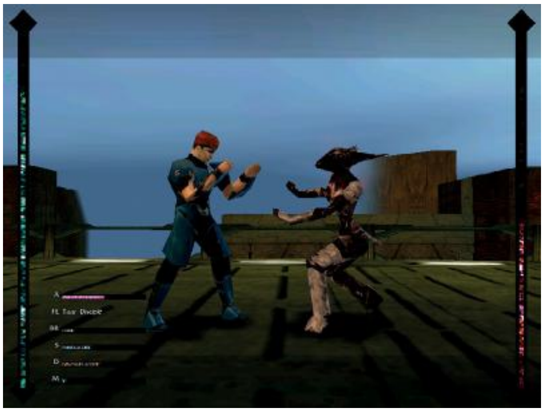
As such, *Omikron*’s reception was lukewarm, with critics enjoying its concept but not its execution. David Cage was also frustrated by how people had difficulty adapting to the multiple gameplay modes, especially those new to gaming – a critical fact in his subsequent decision to create accessible games.

Overall, *Omikron* is somewhat akin to *Ultima I* – a passionate developer throwing everything he loves into a game, pushing the boundaries of the medium. While the end result many not be deep or cohesive, it’s still a unique experience worth having. **FE**

A sequel to *Omikron* has supposedly been under production since 2002, but few details are known, apart from the fact it would be set “100 cycles” after the first game.

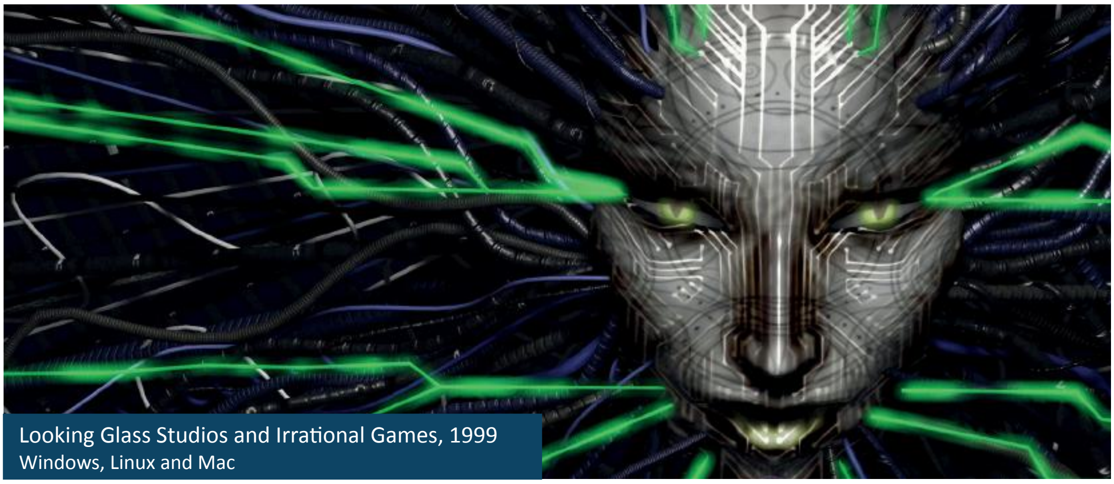


The FPS gameplay is very crude, with several different weapon types but only two that are really useful



Besides fighting for your life against faceless demons, you can also put your fists to the test in arena battles

System Shock 2



Looking Glass Studios and Irrational Games, 1999
Windows, Linux and Mac

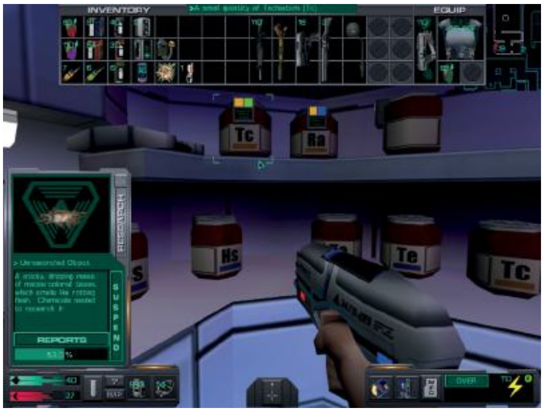
Who could forget playing *System Shock 2*? Who could ever forget the mindless, pipe-wielding mutants patrolling dimly lit hallways. The ungodly sight of blood and bizarre biological growths covering walls and ceilings while a horrific symphony of terror created by computer terminals, whirring security cameras and the ship's relentlessly droning engines plays in the background. The cyborg midwives tending to their "little ones" while rattling off motherly stock phrases of affection. The exceedingly polite, if somewhat pushy and accident-prone protocol droids, or the partially vivisected monkeys rising up against their captors. The creeping feeling that the very environment you inhabit is your mortal enemy. How could anyone possibly forget playing – no, experiencing! – that?

As demanded by the publisher, *SS2* has a multiplayer co-op mode. But beware, the developers stated many times that it's a game best experienced alone.

Whether the 1994 *System Shock* can be considered an RPG is up for debate. The fact remains that, in an age when games like *Doom* limited their content to navigating mazes, finding keys and shooting stuff, *System Shock* featured a complex (if convoluted) UI that allowed the player to jump, crouch, peek around corners, jack into cyberspace, read logs and manage an extensive inventory. Sadly, in what would become a pattern for Looking Glass, releasing a product that was years ahead of its time didn't pay off. *System Shock* obtained wide critical acclaim, but sold poorly.

However, the game managed to develop a cult following over the years. Among the select group of aficionados was a young Ken Levine. His company, Irrational Games, was granted the rights to work on a sequel, allowing for a proper, triumphant return of SHODAN, the devious rogue AI that had so masterfully served as the first game's main adversary.

Developed on a shoestring budget in an office that can be aptly described as Looking Glass's broom closet, there was constant symbiosis between the two companies. First and foremost, Irrational had access to the Dark Engine, which would first be used in the 1998 stealth classic *Thief*. As a result, *System Shock 2* shares many of its strengths with the original *Thief*: the player is able to hide in the shadows of the large, intricately designed levels, with different surfaces generating different levels of noise, potentially alerting nearby enemies.

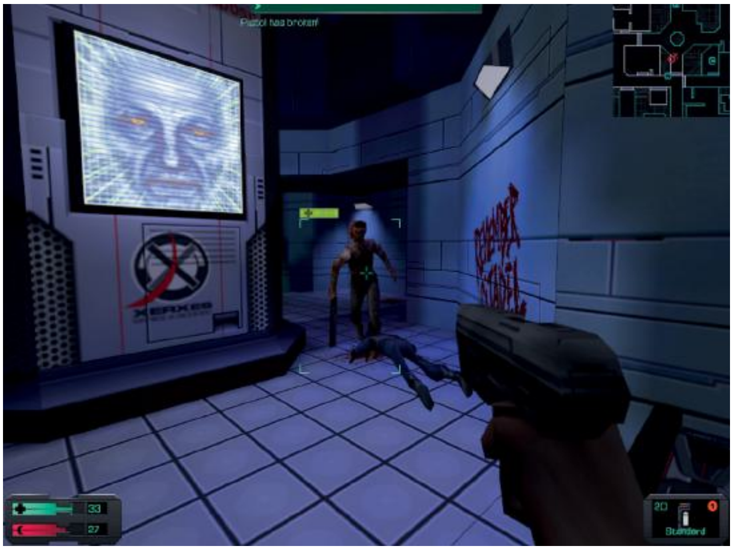


Besides shooting, you'll also have to hack, repair, modify and even research stuff you find

What truly separates *SS2* from its predecessor is the use of a complex character system, resulting in a game that is both FPS and RPG in equal measure. Early on, the player chooses one of three classes: the gun-toting marine, the psionically-endowed OSA agent or the tech-savvy navy hacker. Throughout the game the player can customise his character however he chooses: improving his attributes, selecting traits, training the skills required to equip and repair more powerful items, finding implants or learning any of the 35 available psi powers, which range from temporarily buffing stats to firing mental projectiles and even the ability to teleport yourself.

“For me, the important part of *System Shock 2* is the difficulty and the resource scarcity. I would probably describe it more as being about tension than horror. There’s a horror element to the story and characters are terribly disfigured or in pain or whatever, but that’s actually less important to me than the fact that the game is really, really hard. It requires you to constantly be very focused and intense. There are a lot of things that can go wrong.”

– Jonathan Chey,
System Shock 2*’s project manager*
and lead programmer

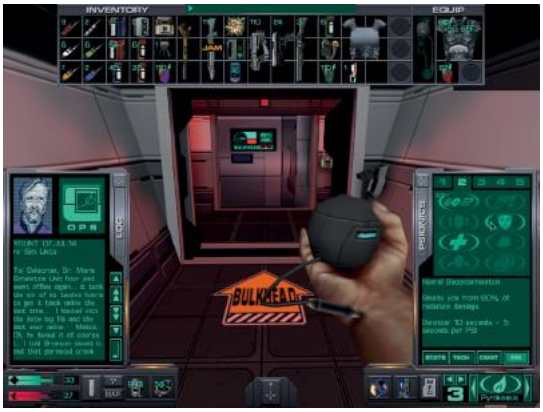


Enemies roam the halls and a rogue AI watches over your every step – there’s no safety in *System Shock 2*

Resources are scarce though: weapons degrade with every single shot and have a nasty tendency to either break or jam during tense firefights. Enemies respawn over time, and even areas which have been previously cleared can become death traps. The high difficulty crowns *SS2*’s unrivalled sense of danger.

To add to the atmosphere, the ghosts of the Von Braun – the faster-than-light spaceship where your descent into hell takes place – still inhabit the vessel. Both figuratively – in the form of increasingly desperate audio logs – and literally, as apparitions that recreate the crew members’ final, ghastly moments.

System Shock 2 struck a nerve, but, despite an overwhelmingly positive reception and the fact that it would go on to inspire both FPS/RPG hybrids and horror games to this very day, it sold below expectations. And with Looking Glass going out of business in 2000, the jarring cliffhanger that concludes the rushed final levels remains unresolved to this day.



Managing the inventory, saving resources and keeping weapons functional are mandatory for your survival

Irrational Games would live on to see the financial success that Looking Glass was never allowed with the 2007 release of the popular *Bioshock* series, which – to the disappointment of many fans – did not turn out to be the next step in the logical evolution of FPS/RPG hybrids they had hoped for.

System Shock 2 stands unchallenged both in its seamless blending of genres and in its ability to truly make the player feel like a pathetic creature of meat and bone, panting and sweating as you run through SHODAN’s corridors. **NH**

SHODAN is voiced by Terri Brosius, who not only worked as a writer and level designer for Looking Glass, but was also part of an early ’90s rock band named *Tribe*.

Mods:

An active community at www.systemshock.org still offers advice and releases mods. Here’s a selection:

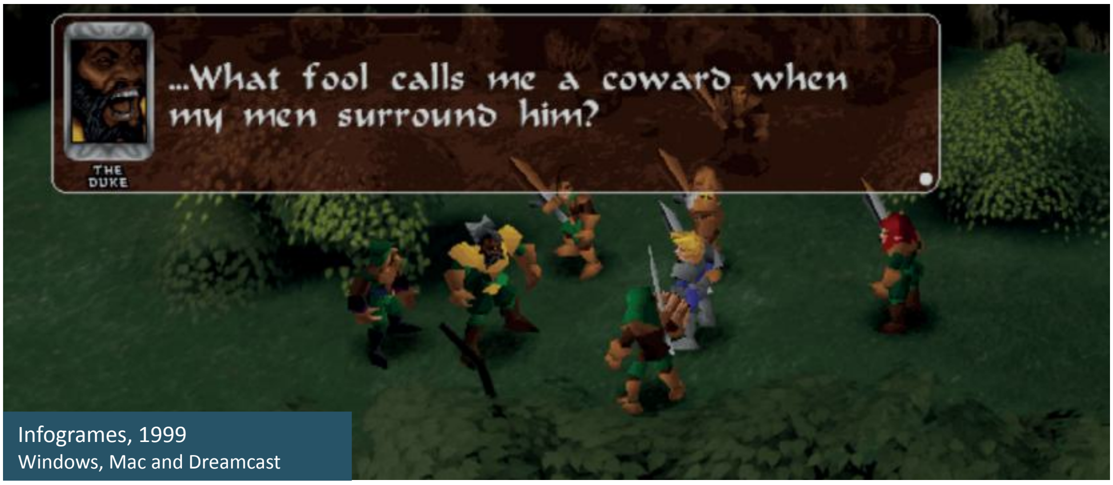
Shock Community Patch: A big collection of fixes from the community. Highly recommended.

TF’s Secmod: Rebalance things, change enemy position and add new content. Great for a replay.

System Shock Fan Missions: Fan-made adventures that range from *SS2* sequels to exploring medieval crypts. Christine’s *Ponterbee Station* is a must-play.

Some fan missions, such as *UNN Polaris,* offer new monsters and environments to the players

Silver

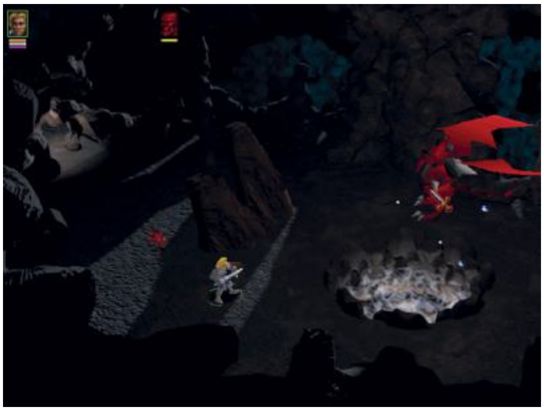


...What fool calls me a coward when my men surround him?

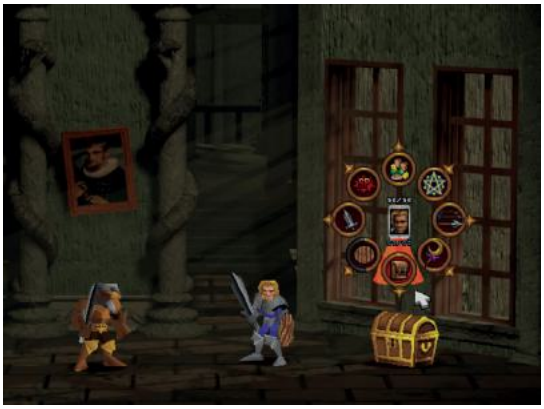
Infogrames, 1999
Windows, Mac and Dreamcast

Silver is a game of many contradictions – it was heavily influenced by Japanese console RPGs, yet it was developed by Europeans, aimed at PCs and removed many traditional elements of the genre, such as experience points and random battles.

It had a mixed reception, but critics universally bashed its weak story. It's as clichéd as fantasy can get: the young knight David sets out on a quest to defeat Silver, an evil sorcerer who kidnapped his wife.



Silver was seen as something novel back then, as RPGs for consoles and RPGs for PCs were worlds apart



Silver includes a radial menu, but it's unintuitive to use it during battle without a pause button

The game's presentation is also a mixed bag. While the pre-rendered backgrounds shine, the 3D characters are small and blocky. What sets the mood brilliantly is the atmospheric music, composed by Dean Evans, and the great voice acting – even if the dialogue itself is predictable and uninteresting.

Silver follows a JRPG-like formula of exploring dungeons, defeating bosses and gathering companions, in a linear and very fast-paced manner – most of the time, you enter a room, kill everyone/solve the puzzle and move on to the next one. You won't even have to worry about stats or experience points, as you simply level up automatically after each boss battle.

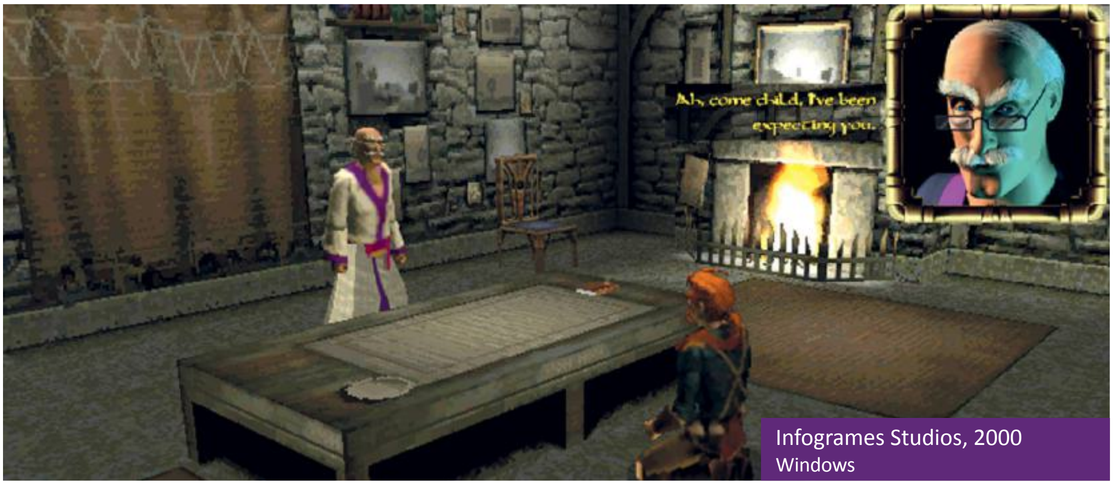
Combat is real-time, but with a twist: you attack by holding down the CTRL key and performing mouse gestures – for example, swipe the mouse up for a lunge, left for a left slash or right-double-click to dodge. There are also a few ranged weapons, magic and artefacts available but, unfortunately, the clunky controls and the lack of a pause function detract from the experience.

During your adventure you'll gather up to three party members. You can directly control one character, or select a group and give them basic orders. However, the radial menu is slow, the screen is usually crowded with enemies and the camera is very far away, making combat rely more on reflex than skill.

Still, battles are satisfying when you only control David against a single adversary, as you're required to learn the foe's behaviour, then use his weak points and the environment to your advantage.

As a fan of classic CRPGs, I cannot but notice *Silver*'s many shortcomings. Yet, despite those obvious flaws, the game managed to win me over with its wonderful music, diverse world and indefinable sense of adventure. When the credits rolled, I was left satisfied – and that's more than enough. **AR**

Soulbringer



Ah, come child, I've been expecting you.

Infogrames Studios, 2000
Windows

With its isometric perspective, real-time combat, simplistic character system and a clichéd story about a Chosen One, it's easy to dismiss *Soulbringer* as a yet another *Diablo* clone. You couldn't be further from the truth, however.

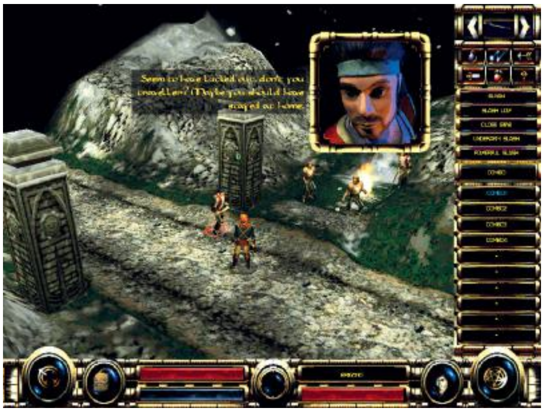
While combat is real-time, it isn't anywhere near the frantic click-fest you'd expect from an action RPG. It actually strives for the very opposite – to make its melee combat as tactical as it can.

Each weapon has up to five possible attacks, which differ in a variety of areas like speed, reach, damage type, etc. You can also combine those attacks into combos, presumably tailored for different enemy types. In fact, you are encouraged to do so, as it's only while performing a combo that your character can dodge or parry. Attacks are also aimed at different body parts – or, more precisely, different height levels, as the game takes the attack's trajectory and elevation into account.

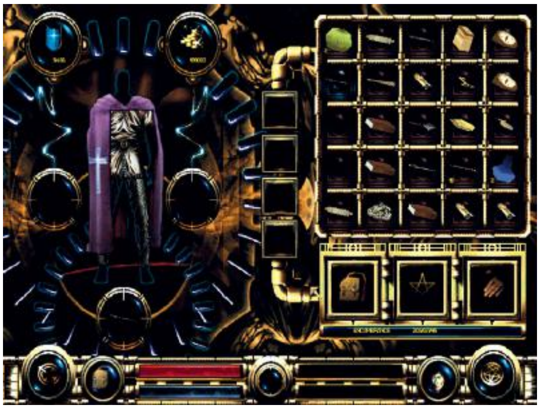
Unfortunately, elevation seems to be the game's Achilles heel, as the AI, while quite competent in other areas, just doesn't understand it properly. This manifests in a variety of ways, from some very weird path-finding, through enemies not noticing you two steps from them, to other enemies wasting all their spells on a bump separating them from you.

Combat isn't the only area in which *Soulbringer* tries to innovate. Its magic system has spells divided into five standard elements, which have associated skills that grow with use. However, those skills provide you not with spell power, but with protection from said element – up to the point where enemy spells start to actually heal you. The trade-off is, of course, decreasing the skill with a subsequent element – water takes away from fire; fire from spirit; and so on.

In its less innovative areas, *Soulbringer* is also quite solid. Its story is well-developed and fairly non-linear, if somewhat clichéd and not without a bit of signature French weirdness. Level design is competent, with plenty of nooks and crannies to explore and adventure-style puzzles to solve, and the visuals, while obviously dated, are quite atmospheric. So if you're able to turn a blind eye to the AI quirks, you're in for a very enjoyable and unique RPG experience. **VK**



At the right of the screen there are eight slots where you can assign combos, even mixing spells and melee attacks



The interface is over-designed and looks very confusing, but it's easy to operate once you're used to it

2000-2004: The rise of the modern gaming industry

If the '90s were a time of great technological jumps, then the start of the new millennium was a time of drastic changes on the business side. It was a period of consolidation that reshaped the gaming industry.

Previously, the successful fifth generation of consoles, led by the PlayStation and the Nintendo 64, had sold millions and greatly expanded the gaming audience. Now the PlayStation 2 was spearheading the sixth console generation and breaking all sales records, eventually becoming the best-selling console of all time. But the development costs for fancy 3D graphics still kept rising at an alarming pace – making games was a highly profitable, but also extremely risky business.

While home computers were more popular than ever before, their games were outshone by the outstanding success of the PS2. A few PC companies like Maxis, Valve and Blizzard struck gold with hits such as *The Sims*, *Counter-Strike* and *Diablo II*, but the top-selling list was entirely dominated by consoles and handhelds.

Former PC giants like Sierra, Brøderbund and Origin had already been sold in the late '90s, and the harsh climate of the early 2000s saw the demise of Interplay, SSI, Westwood Studios, DreamForge, Infogrames, MicroProse, Acclaim and the 3DO Company, among many others.

EA and Activision acquired many of these, further consolidating their position as rulers of the US market, while others had no choice but to close their doors and declare bankruptcy. Many analysts wove grim prophecies about the "Death of PC Gaming" at the time and, while PC games didn't die, they definitely suffered in the 2000s.

In Japan, many companies would merge in order to handle the ever-increasing development costs: Square would merge with Enix, Bandai with Namco, Koei with Tecmo and SEGA with Sammy Corporation. On the hardware side as well, things were getting tighter, with 3dfx being acquired by Nvidia and ATI by AMD, leaving the graphics cards market as the duopoly between AMD and Nvidia that stands to this day.

One of the biggest changes happened in the console market: SEGA left the fight with heavy losses after the consecutive failures of the Saturn and the Dreamcast. But a new challenger, Microsoft, rose in its place.

The first successful US console since the crash of 1983, the Xbox would have a major impact on the industry. Culturally and geographically close to Western developers, the Xbox was the gateway for companies eager to try their hand in the blooming console market. To ease them in, the Xbox (a contraction of "DirectX Box") was designed from the start so that veteran PC developers could easily understand and work with it.

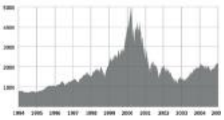
Signalling the start of a new era, the early 2000s was a time of change, and companies either adapted or died.

Trends:

Online Games: The Internet proved itself the "killer app" for PCs, finally providing a reason for every house to own a computer and bringing in people with no previous background in games or technology. PC titles like *The Sims* and *RollerCoaster Tycoon* were massive hits among these more casual gamers, but even bigger were online communities like *Neopets, Habbo Hotel* and *Club Penguin*, Flash game portals like Newgrounds, browser games like *Travian* and *Bejeweled,* as well as several dress-up and hidden-object games.

Neopets is a virtual pet website that was launched in 1999 and quickly grew popular, reaching 35 million users in 2005

The Dot-com Bubble: This is a tangential subject, but key to understanding the insecurity that loomed over the early 2000s. With the birth and popularisation of the Internet, several companies appeared out of nowhere and made billions, such as Yahoo, Amazon and Google. Many tried to follow, creating online companies as a sure-fire path to quick money. When the bubble burst in 2000, countless companies went broke, money vanished and investors became wary of technological "gold mines" – such as videogames.



The NASDAQ index spiked in early 2000, fuelled by speculation over online companies, then fell sharply

Handheld Consoles: After *Pokémon*'s success revitalised the decade-old Game Boy, Nintendo started to quickly develop new handhelds. The Game Boy Color came in 1998, followed by the Game Boy Advance in 2001. While these were successful, their big hit was the Nintendo DS, released in 2004 and to date the best-selling handheld console of all time. In 2004 Sony also released its PlayStation Portable – the PSP – and started a rivalry that continued with their successors, the 3DS and the short-lived PS Vita.

All Nintendo DS models combined have sold over 150 million units, making it second only to the PS2 in popularity

The **PlayStation 2** is released. It dominated the 2000s and became the best-selling video game console in history, with over 155 million units sold.

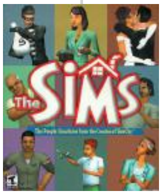
The **GameCube** was a bet on "family-friendly" consoles, but the lack of third-party games made it struggle. It sold 21 million units.

The **Xbox** was Microsoft's entry into the console wars. It would revolutionise the gaming scenario in the US and sell 24 million units.

Facebook is launched. Initially only for students, it opened up in 2006 and became the world's largest social network, with over 1.8 billion users.

World of Warcraft is released and becomes the standard for western MMOs. It peaked at 12 million subscribers in 2010, but remains very popular.

2000 | 2001 | 2002 | 2003 | 2004



The Sims is a surprise hit, selling 12 million units and dethroning *Myst* as the top-selling PC game. As a whole, *The Sims* franchise has sold over 200 million copies as of 2016.

Bejeweled is released, at first as a browser game. Later it would get multiple ports and sequels. A success with casual players, the series has over 150 million downloads.

Grand Theft Auto III takes the world by storm, selling 14 million units across all platforms, popularising open-world sandbox games and leading to a new debate over videogame violence.

AMD creates the first 64-bit processors for home use, allowing for PCs to use more than 4GB of RAM. By 2005, AMD and Intel would also introduce new multi-core desktop processors.

Half-Life 2 brings in an innovative physics engine and a more cinematic approach. It also comes with Valve's newly released Steam, and leads to popular mods such as *Garry's Mod*.

Deus Ex

Ion Storm, 2000
Windows, Mac and PS2

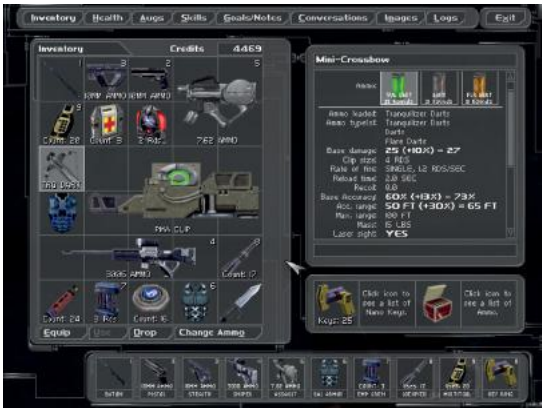
Warren Spector began planning *Deus Ex* in 1993, first under the title *Troubleshooter* at Origin, then later as *Junction Point* at Looking Glass Studios. The game only took off when John Romero invited Spector to join Ion Storm and "make the game of his dreams".

I'll start with a confession: I didn't play *Deus Ex* until many years after its release. And, even after I discovered it, I was sceptical at first. After all, it's an unattractive game with drab aesthetics, awkward animations and uneven voice acting.

The first steps taken and first shots fired feel clunky, and there's a gentle irony about how a game featuring brilliant AIs has NPCs that routinely run into walls like mindless wind-up toys. And yet, like its powerful nano-augmentations, *Deus Ex* has a habit of getting under one's skin and staying there.

I first tried *Deus Ex* out of historic curiosity, but its dusty appearance belied a game that was (and still is) vibrant and fresh. An immersive sim developed by former Looking Glass employees, the game has much in common with classics like *Thief* and *System Shock,* yet *Deus Ex* remains one of a kind. But pinning down exactly why it's so compelling and relevant isn't easy.

You may have heard fans talk about the game's player agency – the freedom to do things your way. To my mind, however, this freedom is just one of many features that contribute to what distinguishes *Deus Ex* most: its verisimilitude.



Not only will you have to choose how to spend money, mods and upgrades, but the inventory itself has only limited storage, forcing you to pick your gear wisely

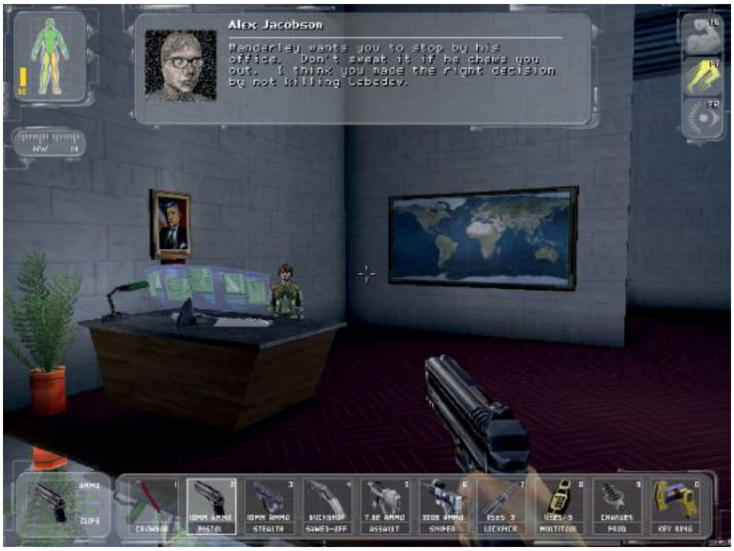
Despite its low fidelity and awkward character AI, I have never played a game in which the player's presence in a virtual world feels this authentic. Hub areas such as Hell's Kitchen and Hong Kong are rich microcosms. These places may seem small in comparison to open-world games, but they are dense with detail in the form of secrets, newspapers and data cubes to discover and study, as well as inhabitants who philosophise, ask for your help, try to manipulate you, and take note of your actions.

The game's unmatched reactivity makes these characters seem real. Rather than ignoring your agency until some Big Binary Plot Decision like most games, the denizens of *Deus Ex* will react to your most minute actions and comment on the places you visit, the problems you solve and the manner in which you solve them, and the people you meet, kill, or let live.

The scale and complexity of the main missions' maps is often mind-boggling; the plethora of ways to move through them almost overwhelming. You can blow up a door and go in, guns blazing; pick a lock and sneak inside; stack crates or use your jump augmentation to reach a high window or roof; crawl through twisting systems of vents; hack security panels to turn the enemy's robots against them, etc.

Affordances depend on your character build and inventory. Skill points are awarded for completing objectives or finding secrets and can be invested in weapon handling, hacking, lock-picking, swimming, and more. Augmentation canisters target specific body parts and offer a binary choice: do you want to move quietly or quicker? Do you want to hit harder with melee weapons or lift heavy objects? These augmentations can then be levelled up, allowing further specialisation, while weapon mods can add scopes, increase accuracy or reduce recoil.

> "*Deus Ex* was conceived with the idea that we'd accept players as our collaborators, that we'd put power back in their hands, ask them to make choices, and let them deal with the consequences of those choices. It was designed, from the start, as a game about player expression, not about how clever we were as designers, programmers, artists or storytellers."
>
> *– Warren Spector,*
> Deus Ex*'s project director*



Alex Jacobson

Manderley wants you to stop by his office. Don't sweat it if he chews you out. I think you made the right decision by not killing Lebedev.

From small environmental details to side characters who comment on your actions and grow as the game progresses, *Deus Ex*'s world feels alive and real

Replaying the game with different augmentations and skills will show you new and surprising facets of familiar places, yet, unlike spiritual successors such as *Dishonored*, these decisions never restrict you to either a stealth or combat-only playstyle. Instead, your choices allow for new and interesting approaches to each individual obstacle.

The missions you undertake and places you explore are meaningfully embedded in a world and story no less rich than these individual spaces. As J.C. Denton, valuable asset of UNATCO with his superior nanotechnological augmentations, it's your task to untangle a web of conspiracies and lies in a world suffering from widespread terrorism, political oppression and a mysterious plague epidemic. Despite its bleakness, *Deus Ex* deals neither in moral absolutes nor cynicism. Instead, it offers an uncommonly differentiated world where the lines between good and evil are present but contested.

Your enemies retain their humanity, and the motivations of allies are never above suspicion. Gunther Hermann, struggling against his outdated augmentations, is a brilliant example of effective characterisation through broad strokes. And if you wish to go deep, you can read and discuss political philosophy, religion, history and transhumanism.

The game's central themes of paranoia, hunger for power and thirst for knowledge are not only talked about, but also evoked by the gameplay itself. World, story and mechanics mesh elegantly, and playing the game is an all-round cerebral and coherent experience. *Deus Ex* is a vibrant masterpiece that not only achieves what few games – then or now – dare to attempt, but also makes it seem easy. **AI**

The PS2 port of *Deus Ex* arrived in 2002 and is quite different from the original game, as large areas were split and redesigned to be able to run on the console.

Mods:

The Nameless Mod: A long and elaborate campaign, featuring great level design and two separate storylines. A great experience, even if the setting is a bit silly.

2027: A fan-made prequel to *Deus Ex*, very faithful in terms of gameplay, exploration and setting.

ZODIAC: An excellent set of six missions in which you play as Paul Denton, uncovering the game's mysteries.

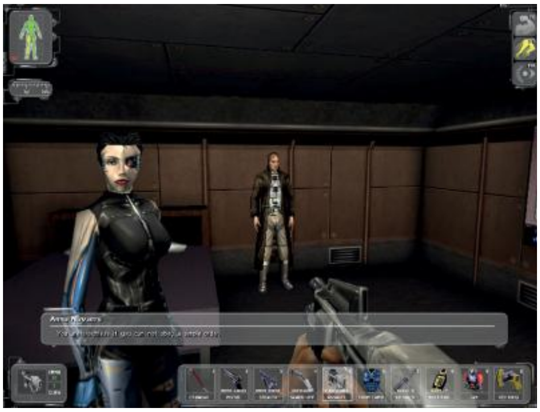
Deus Ex: Nihilum: Another great fan-made campaign.

GMDX: An award-winning mod that enhances the AI, graphics, augs, skills, perks and difficulty, while staying as faithful as possible to the original game.

Deus Ex: Revision: Similar to *GMDX*, but it takes more liberties with its gameplay changes. Available on Steam.

HDTP/New Vision: Two mods that update the game's graphics. They are featured in both *Revision* and *GMDX*.

Shifter/BioMod: Two rather controversial mods that make radical rebalancing and gameplay changes.



Instead of just offering dialogue choices, *Deus Ex* reacts to the player's actions, shaping the narrative around them

Baldur's Gate II:
Shadows of Amn

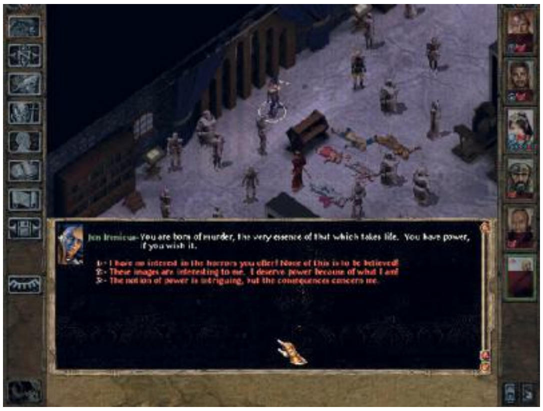
BioWare, 2000
Windows, Mac (iOS and Android)*

Baldur's Gate II: Shadow of Amn for me was more than a game; it was an unforgettable journey through the world of Faêrun that came alive before my eyes, including friends and villains with believable yet interesting and unique histories and personalities of their own. It was my first CRPG ever, and one that I fell absolutely in love with.

BG2 continues the story of the first game, but you can skip *BG1*, if you wish, without losing much. Set in the Forgotten Realms, rich in detail and history, you assume the role of Gorion's ward, one of the many offspring of the deceased God of Murder, Bhaal.

The story unfolds as your unusual heritage draws the attention of a powerful mage, Irenicus, whose sole motive is to unlock your power for his own use. I loved how the villain's true nature is cleverly disguised by his seemingly unemotional nature in the beginning and his powerful dialogues are delivered with masterful voice acting, which blew me away.

Ultimately, the story of *BG2* is a personal one: a journey of discovery and the protagonist's struggle against their own nature, mirrored by the villain.



Jon Irenicus-You are born of murder, the very essence of that which takes life. You have power, if you wish it.

1- I have no interest in the horrors you offer! None of this is to be believed!
2- These images are interesting to me. I deserve power because of what I am!
3- The notion of power is intriguing, but the consequences concerns me.

Dream sequences allow you to interact with the villain, offering insight into his views and atmosphere to the game

Naturally, it is fitting that your companions play a huge role in *BG2*, influencing your decisions as you bond with them throughout your journey. The NPCs are extremely well-developed, with their own unique quests, personalities and banter with you or with each other; this is the biggest improvement over the game's predecessor. Each NPC will remember their previous conversations with you and react to your decisions accordingly, allowing you to be their friend or enemy, or even start a romantic relationship. This is the part I enjoyed the most in *BG2*; it was such a satisfying experience, to get to know them, help them develop and even save their souls.

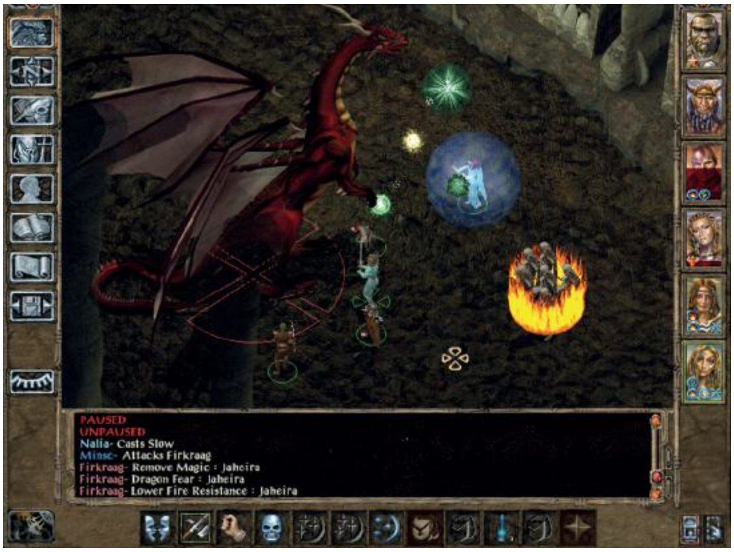
Most of your companions can be found within the city of Athkatla, which functions as your base of operations early in the game, and from which you are given freedom to explore and experience the city and other neighbouring regions. Athkatla is a delight to explore; each part of the city is well fleshed out, populated by townsfolk of different statuses or professions. While it outwardly appears that the city is co-governed by a merchant council and a sinister group of mages, there are other powerful organisations that play prominent roles; soon you will find yourself caught in their struggle for control of the city. You also have the chance to increase your standing within Athkatla through the stronghold quests, which vary depending on your player character's chosen class.

During your journey, you'll find a wealth of side-quests; so many that you might feel overwhelmed at times. Most of the quests are varied and well-written, and often incorporate puzzles, ranging from simple riddles to elaborate plots with you playing the role of detective – for example, one has you attempting to prove your sanity by answering riddles in order to escape from a prison where mental "deviants" are held.

***The Enhanced Edition of *Baldur's Gate II*, released by Beamdog in 2013, adds new content, wide-screen support, bug fixes and new ports.**

"I have two primary memories from the *Baldur's Gate* days. The first is the horror of crunch. *Shadows of Amn* was an enormous game, with so many characters, plots, items, spells and places that it took a lot of work and passion to get that beast out the door. That leads to the second memory: creative fulfilment. I think the stars aligned for *Baldur's Gate II* in a way that they probably won't again. We had a finished engine that allowed us to focus on content rather than basic functionality."

– James Ohlen,
Co-lead designer of Baldur's Gate II



PAUSED
UNPAUSED
Nalia- Casts Slow
Minsc- Attacks Firkraag
Firkraag- Remove Magic : Jaheira
Firkraag- Dragon Fear : Jaheira
Firkraag- Lower Fire Resistance : Jaheira

Baldur's Gate II uses the Infinity Engine, featuring gorgeous isometric graphics and real-time-with-pause combat

Your quests will take you to many different places in Faerûn – a pirate island, a beautiful Elven city, the Underdark (where the most fearsome and terrible creatures reside) – or even to different planes.

You will encounter interesting and often hostile inhabitants of the places you visit, which adds variety and fun to the combat. You will have to come up with different tactics to survive some tough battles. Just one misplaced spell can make a battle extremely difficult, as some spells affect not only your enemies, but your companions or even innocents in the area – and you will have to deal with the deadly consequences!

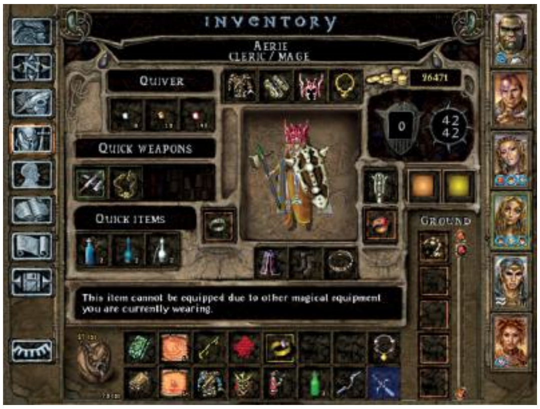
Magical combat is engaging and strategic, involving more than just blasting targets with fireballs, and the high-level cap means you'll see some of the most powerful spells *AD&D* has to offer. Mages often have layers of protection spells which will need to be dispelled, and will turn invisible or even stop time itself to prepare a devastating attack on your party.

Of course, your mages have the same abilities, and making best use of the limited number of spells they can cast per day can turn a nasty beating into a thrilling victory.

For the non-casting classes, there is a huge range of weapons available. The majority of weapons come with their own history and lore (or sometimes humorous conversations!), which are often interesting and fun to read. There are also a number of legendary weapons which can be forged using parts found during your journey – most of the time it's well worth it to hunt for these parts.

Baldur's Gate II is one hell of a journey; there is so much to experience, so much to see; it is hard to describe it all using words alone – you will have to experience it for yourself! By the end of your journey through both *Shadows of Amn* and the *Throne of Bhaal* expansion, you will be as eager to share your experiences with others as I am. **SN**

***BG2*'s game manual is an attraction by itself, spiral-bound and 262 pages long, describing all 298 spells in the game.**



This item cannot be equipped due to other magical equipment you are currently wearing.

The great artwork and item descriptions add a lot to the game, and the UI is easily one of the best among RPGs

Mods:

Baldur's Gate Trilogy-WeiDU: An excellent fan-made alternative to the *Enhanced Edition*, it combines both *Baldur's Gate* games into one vastly improved game.

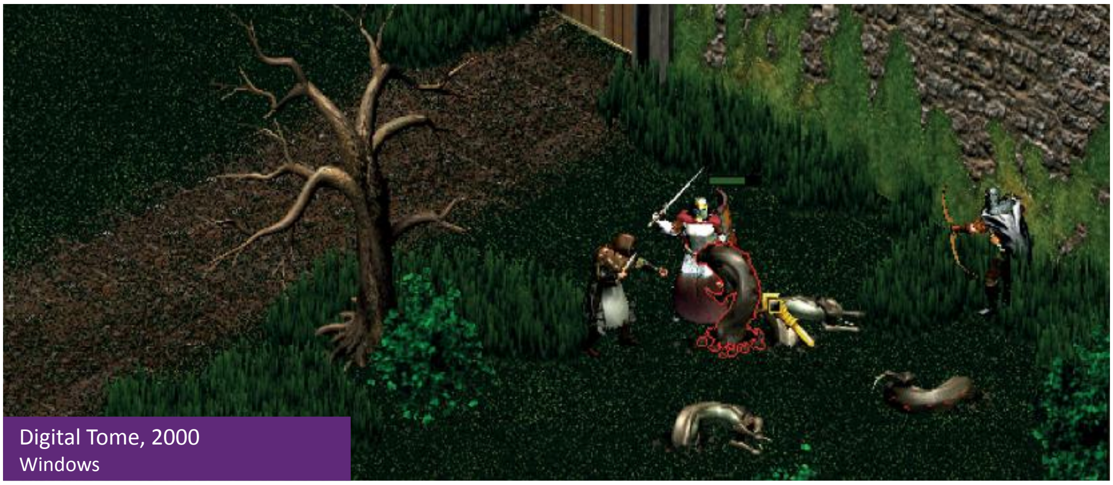
Sword Coast Stratagems: An elaborate tactical/AI mod that makes combat really challenging.

Spell Revisions: Fixes and balances the game's spells.

Ascension Mod: Created by David Gaider, one of the game's designers, this mod aims to make the ending more satisfying, adding new content and challenges.

Big World Project: A massive compatibility guide on how to install over 500 mods for BG without issues. Comes with a handy automatic setup tool.

Siege of Avalon

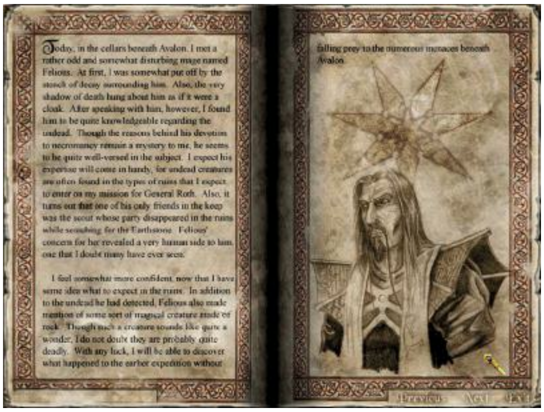


Digital Tome, 2000
Windows

Years before Telltale Games became famous for its episodic adventure games, a small studio called Digital Tome created *Siege of Avalon*, an "Episodic Computer Game Novel" told in six chapters.

The game is set in a generic fantasy world, but under unusual circumstances: you're trapped inside a massive castle under siege. And despite its being an action RPG, the focus here is on the characters and story. Or at least that was the initial concept.

The first chapter of *Siege of Avalon* was released in April 2000 as shareware, while later chapters were regularly made available for download at $9.95 each. The final one was released in June 2001.

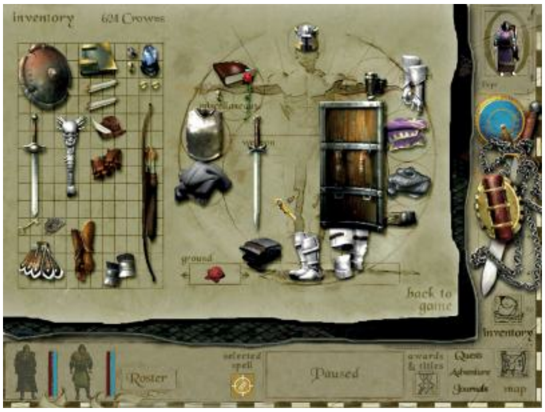


Today, in the cellars beneath Avalon, I met a rather odd and somewhat disturbing mage named Felious. At first, I was somewhat put off by the stench of decay surrounding him. Also, the very shadow of death hung about him as if it were a cloak. After speaking with him, however, I found him to be quite knowledgeable regarding the undead. Though the reasons behind his devotion to necromancy remain a mystery to me, he seems to be quite well-versed in the subject. I expect his expertise will come in handy, for undead creatures are often found in the types of ruins that I expect to enter on my mission for General Roth. Also, it turns out that one of his only friends in the keep was the scout whose party disappeared in the ruins while searching for the Earthstone. Felious' concern for her revealed a very human side to him, one that I doubt many have ever seen.

I feel somewhat more confident now that I have some idea what to expect in the ruins. In addition to the undead he had detected, Felious also made mention of some sort of magical creature made of rock. Though such a creature sounds like quite a wonder, I do not doubt they are probably quite deadly. With any luck, I will be able to discover what happened to the earlier expedition without

falling prey to the numerous menaces beneath Avalon

The game prides itself on being text-heavy; your character himself writes a detailed journal describing his adventures



The inventory is arguably the game's best part: there are 12 layers of armour, and you must manage defence, movement restriction and damage absorption

As you start the game, you'll choose between three classes: Fighter, Scout and Magician. Instead of levelling up, you earn training points that can be used to increase stats and skills or spent with trainers to purchase spells and special passive bonuses.

The first chapter starts slowly, but is intriguing. As a lowly peasant trying to learn the fate of your brother, you'll explore the castle, meet its many inhabitants and trade favours until you're given some answers, enemies appear and the killing begins.

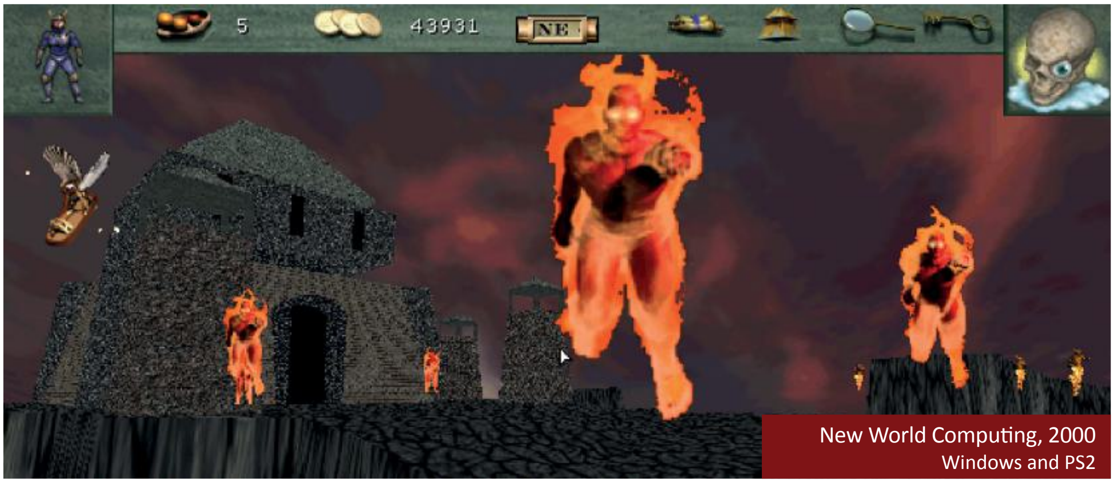
Combat, however, is the game's worst part. Enemies are mindless, path-finding is non-existent, luck is far too important and there are huge balance issues, such as archers dealing absurd amounts of damage. You can later recruit up to two AI-controlled companions, but they are equally stupid and easily killed – permanently! As such, combat is usually won by employing cheesy tactics and many, many reloads.

This wouldn't be such a big problem in a story-focused game, but, after a good start, *Siege of Avalon* loses its bearings and becomes a combat-focused title. Chapter 2 is just a dull dungeon crawl inside a cave; Chapters 3, 4 and 5 are optional and focus on one class playstyle each (but aren't exclusive); Chapter 6 is the final showdown. They're all mostly just combat.

There are satisfying moments, such as sneaking into the enemy's camp to spy, hunting rare gear and a few branching quests, but it's all buried under hours of frustrating combat and excessive backtracking. Worse yet, the initial tension of living under siege quickly vanishes and NPCs become soulless quest-givers.

Siege of Avalon's concept was great, but its glaring flaws and lack of focus made it a hard sell, especially at a time when people still weren't used to episodic games – or buying them online. And it surely didn't help that *Diablo II* came out right after *SoA*'s first chapter. **FE**

Might and Magic VIII: Day of the Destroyer



New World Computing, 2000
Windows and PS2

Might and Magic VIII tells two doomsday stories. The player's in-game goal is to thwart Escaton, an ancient planeswalker intent on destroying the world. However, the game's flaws and rushed production schedule were early signs of another tragedy – the bankruptcy of New World Computing and its new parent company, 3DO, just a few years later.

The third *Might and Magic* title in less than three years, *MMVIII* was the last game to use the ageing *MMVI* engine, with an updated UI but few changes to the graphics or gameplay of its predecessors.

The biggest difference is how party composition works: instead of managing a fixed party, you create a single main character at the start of the game, then hire up to four additional NPCs to fill out your ranks. Unfortunately for min-maxers, the initial attributes, skills and appearances of these hirelings cannot be customised without a save editor.

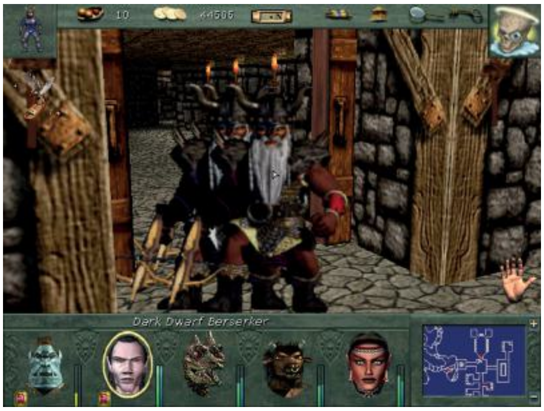
While previous games kept to a mostly generic fantasy setting with some sci-fi elements, you now go to Jadame, a continent populated by monstrous, albeit well-meaning, races. For instance, in the starting area, Dagger Wound Island, you find yourself defending a town of friendly lizardmen from human marauders. Additionally, many traditional classes such as Archer, Paladin and Sorcerer are replaced by Dark Elves, Vampires, Necromancers and even Dragons!

However, the game's new party system presents some balance issues: a few overlevelled hirelings can be obtained at an early stage in the game, and Dragon characters are powerful enough to trivialise much of the game's content – they require no equipment, breathe fire and can learn to fly, carrying the entire party on their backs! On the other hand, some of the new classes are underwhelming, offering little to differentiate them from previous *M&M* classes.

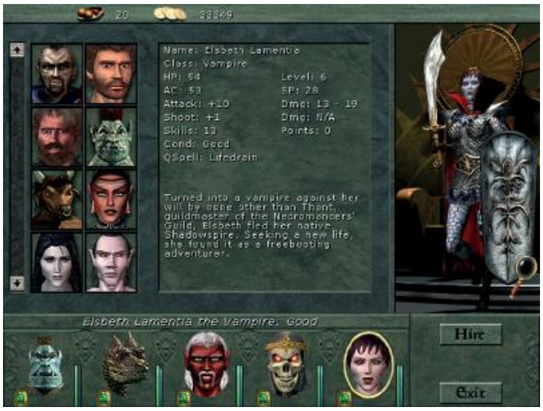
New World Computing tried to give more focus to storytelling, but the plot itself is not that interesting and there's no sense of urgency. Mid-game, you're asked to make some choices when forming an alliance, but they ultimately don't make much of a difference.

While it's not the strongest entry in the series, *Might and Magic VIII* is still a good game that scratches the same itch as *MMVI* or *VII* – a fan of those games would most likely enjoy this one as well. **DH**

As in *MMVI* and *VII*, GrayFace's patch fixes bugs and adds features like mouse-look. The Choose Party mod allows you to start with any party setup you wish, while the MMerge mod allows you to play *MMVI*, *VII* and *VIII* as a single game.



The interface was better than in previous games, but the graphics remained mostly the same, looking outdated next to other games released in 2000


Name: Elsbeth Lamentia
Class: Vampire
HP: 54
Level: 6
AC: 53
SP: 28
Attack: +10
Dmg: 13 - 19
Shoot: +1
Dmg: N/A
Skills: 13
Points: 0
Cond: Good
QSpell: Lifedrain

Turned into a vampire against her will by none other than Thant, guildmaster of the Necromancers' Guild, Elsbeth fled her native Shadowspire. Seeking a new life, she found it as a freebooting adventurer.

Elsbeth Lamentia the Vampire: Good

Party size was expanded to five characters, but now you only create one at the start – the others must be recruited; despite being pre-made, these characters have little personality

Diablo II

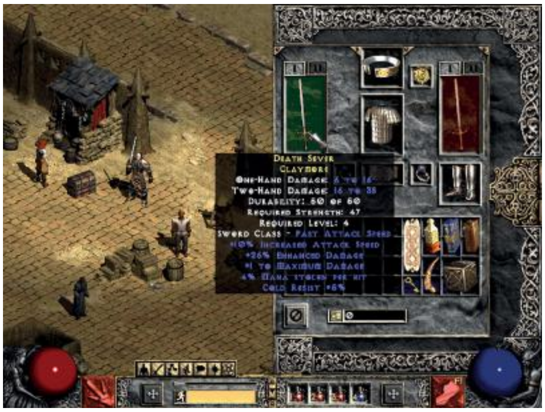
Blizzard North, 2000
Windows and Mac

Blizzard still provides support for *Diablo II*, and in 2016 they patched it to run better on modern computers.

Released in June of 2000, *Diablo II* was the highly anticipated sequel to the successful PC action RPG *Diablo*. All that anticipation was well-rewarded, as *Diablo II* delivered a massively expanded experience of the original game, including five new character classes (seven, with 2001's *Lord of Destruction* expansion) and numerous features which became ubiquitous in action RPGs, such as skill trees and the coloured item quality tiers (white for common, blue for magical, yellow for rare, etc.).

Diablo II was a tremendous success, selling more than 10 million copies across the early 2000s. It was a pioneer of online multiplayer, taking advantage of Blizzard Entertainment's popular Battle.net service. It also introduced an entire generation to the niche Roguelike genre, and to the concept of procedural generation, an idea which has become massively popular in contemporary games.

Like many iconic games that came out of the '90s, the *Diablo* series was born of the collision of multiple genres – mainly Roguelikes and early action RPG titles like *Ultima VIII: Pagan*.



Death Sever
Claymore
One-Hand Damage: 6 to 16
Two-Hand Damage: 16 to 35
Durability: 60 of 60
Required Strength: 47
Required Level: 4
Sword Class - Fast Attack Speed
+10% Increased Attack Speed
+26% Enhanced Damage
+1 to Maximum Damage
4% Mana stolen per hit
Cold Resist +6%

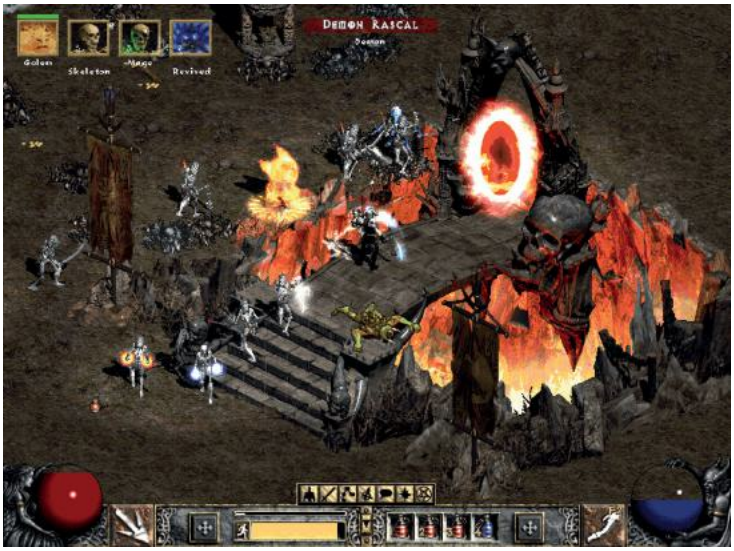
Diablo II took the concept of magical items from Roguelikes and expanded it, creating the now-famous coloured rarity tiers

In the early '80s, the cult game *Rogue* radically reinterpreted the RPG genre. Rather than trying to recreate the massive possibility space of tabletop RPGs like *Dungeons & Dragons*, *Rogue* sought to strip them down to just a few core ideas. Plot, towns and NPCs were all removed or greatly reduced so that the player could immediately start exploring a procedurally-generated dungeon. An entire sub-genre sprang up from this model, in which players challenge an endless variety of dungeons, dying suddenly, dying often, and sometimes finding an amazing piece of treasure.

In the mid-'90s, *Diablo* creators David Brevik, Max Schaefer and Erik Schaefer set out to create a Roguelike, but design compromises crept in almost immediately. Their publisher, Blizzard, told them that their game had to operate in real time – serendipitously giving *Diablo* the frantic combat for which it is known. The designers also added other non-traditional elements to its Roguelike core, such as character classes and multiplayer support. The result of all these design compromises is a strange and beautiful game, part roguelike, part hack-and-slash, and entirely addictive.

Diablo II represents a refinement and expansion of the original *Diablo*. All of the same core ideas reappear, but the UI and core loop are streamlined. Virtually every part of the game is greatly expanded as well. Instead of four dungeons spanning 16 levels, *Diablo II* features dozens of sprawling dungeons, taking place across five large "acts". Instead of a few dozen unique items to find, the loot tables contain hundreds of them. The frantic action of the first game reappears, as players hack their way through thousands of monsters and five extra-tough, unique bosses. Multiplayer returns, and raises the party size from four to eight players. Indeed, multiplayer is the place where the real magic of the game happens.

> "We used the term 'kill/reward' to describe our basic gameplay. Players continually kill monsters and get rewarded with treasure and experience. But the rewards don't stop there. We offer a steady stream of goals and accomplishments to entice the player to keep playing. There's always a quest that is almost finished, a waypoint almost reached, an experience level almost achieved, and a dungeon nearly cleared out."
>
> *– Erich Schaefer,*
> Diablo II*'s project and design lead*



Diablo II's classes go beyond the classic Warrior, Mage and Thief trifecta, with Paladins enhanced by powerful auras and Necromancers who can summon armies of minions

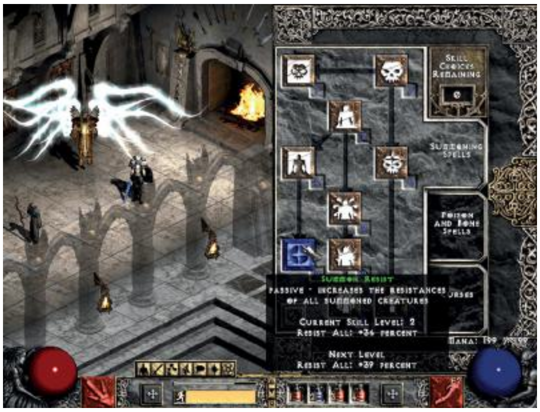
Diablo II was on the forefront of a new wave in RPG design. The game takes players through five acts and three difficulty settings. For casual, mainstream gamers this amount of content is plenty. But, for the truly devoted, the real game begins only after the player beats the final boss on the hardest difficulty.

Loot is procedurally generated, augmented by hundreds of rare, unique equipment pieces, meaning the game can go on indefinitely. Even to this day, *Diablo II* fans still spend hundreds – or even thousands – of hours online with their friends, killing bosses and clearing endgame levels. They search for the best and rarest items, or the even rarer runes, which can be assembled into equipment so powerful (and so full of new, strange abilities) that it can change the experience of the game entirely. And if a player's sorceress finds a few pieces of high-end barbarian gear, that player can trade it – or decide to play a barbarian, gaining a fresh perspective on the game.

In this, *Diablo II* prefigures the kind of long endgame that would become the norm in *World of Warcraft* and many other MMORPGs. A veteran player will spend far more time playing max-level content than they will in getting to that point, and only a very small group will ever get up to the character level-cap. The endgame of *Diablo II* recalls the ultra-hardcore Roguelikes the developers enjoyed, especially *Angband* and *Moria*. Yet it still allows more casual gamers to squeeze some extra enjoyment out of the endgame without having to commit to weeks of repetition.

The best judgment that a reviewer can offer about *Diablo II* is simply to echo history's own judgement. It introduced an entire generation of players to both the hack-and-slash RPG and the Roguelike. If the sales figures and continued enthusiasm for the game are any measure, the game has something in it for every kind of player. Most games cannot say the same about one genre, let alone two. **PNH**

***Diablo II: Resurrected* is a 2021 remaster of *Diablo II*, adding modern graphics and some quality of life features, such as item auto-pickup and bigger stashes.**



Inspired by *Civilization II*'s tech trees, *Diablo II* created skill trees, providing three specialisations to each class

Mods:

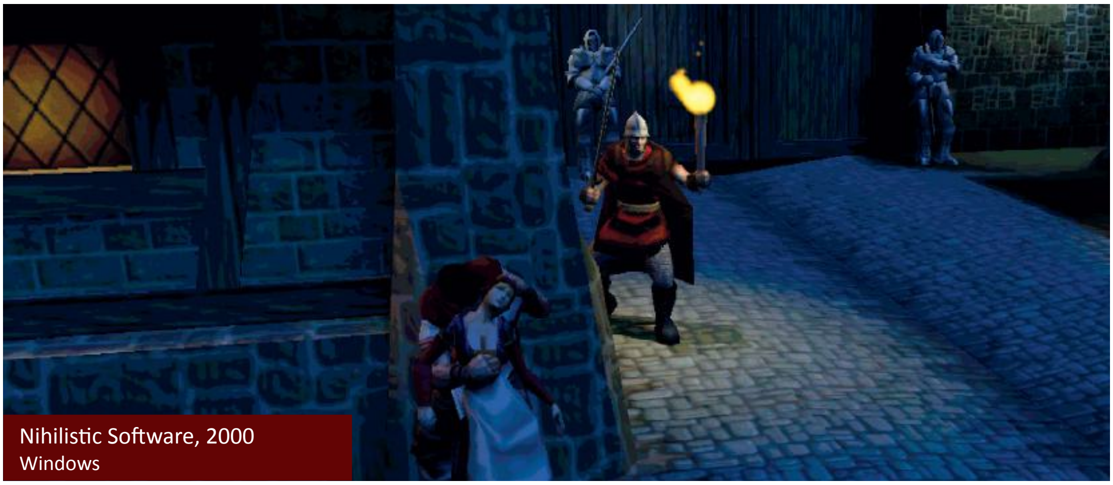
Back to Hellfire: Aims to recreate the experience of the original *Diablo*, changing classes, skills, music, etc.

Le Royaume des Ombres: A huge, total modification, it offers a new world to explore, new skills, quests, monsters, crafting recipes and over 2,000 new items.

Hell Unleashed: Enhances the game, increasing the size of dungeons, adding new tougher enemies and making boss fights more complex.

Median XL: One of the most popular *Diablo II* mods, it completely changes the skills, adds various new monsters with reworked AI and new unique items, plus "uberquests" and challenges for veteran players.

Vampire:
The Masquerade - Redemption

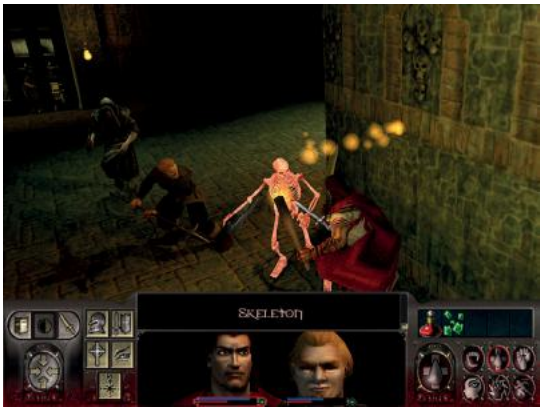


Nihilistic Software, 2000
Windows

Vampire: *The Masquerade Redemption* has always been overshadowed by its big brother, *Bloodlines*. It might not be the best CRPG ever, but it's still a bloody good game. With a small team, Nihilistic Software was able to build beautiful environments and a compelling story.

While convalescing in medieval Prague, a young French crusader called Christof Romuald falls in love with one of the nuns taking care of him. His overzealous attitude leads him straight into conflict with local vampires and paints him as a worthy candidate for undeath. Turned into a vampire by the Brujah, a clan of warrior-philosophers from ancient Carthage, our hero wanders through Prague and Vienna by night to save his lost love and prevent the awakening of an ancient, wicked vampire. Halfway through the game, Christof is projected through time and awakes on the Eve of the New Year 2000 in London to end his quest.

The story itself is simple and extremely straightforward but the unique setting created by White Wolf is well-explained and keeps its density.



Christof and an ally battle Cappadocians inside the catacombs of medieval Prague

A few occasional choices are given to the player, but they don't change much and only impact on the ending. Through the two time periods, three companions will join Christof on his desperate quest. Entertaining and diverse, they will comment on every place and every character encountered by distilling interesting tidbits about *Vampire's* universe.

While the time-skip doesn't really change anything gameplay-wise (except the weapons, the UI and the characters), the culture shock felt by Christof is pretty entertaining to watch. Putting aside the cheesy love story, the cast and the writing are good enough to keep your attention. Strangely enough, self-conscious humour is also present and works pretty well.

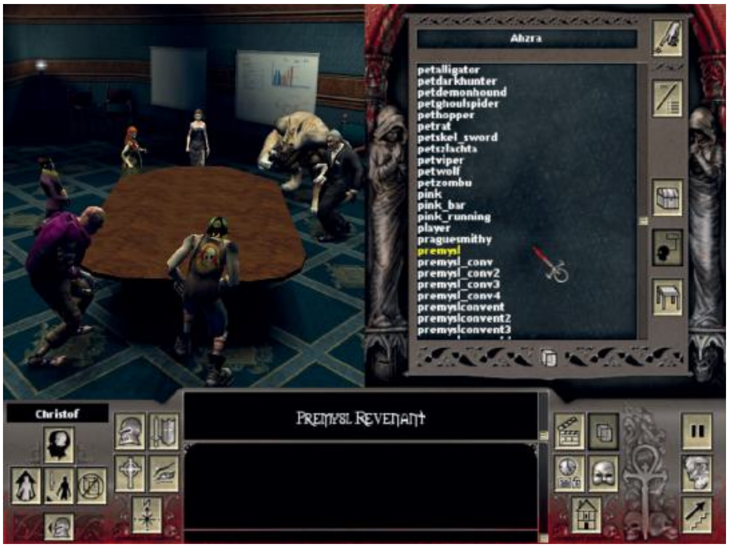
Aficionados of the original pen-and-paper game felt deeply betrayed by *Redemption*'s gameplay. Indeed, while the profound political nature of the vampires is quickly established, the game is exclusively based around combat. *Redemption* plays as a deeply narrative *Diablo*-like. Love it or hate it, but there is no way to avoid it. If you accept it, it is an entertaining and original experience.

On the surface, *Redemption*'s gameplay is very similar to *Diablo*'s: click on enemies until extinction, get loot, rinse and repeat. The vanilla formula changes quite a bit once you become a vampire. Your PCs have three bars: life, blood and frenzy. By draining humans (or enemies), you get blood which allows you to heal yourself and fuel disciplines – vampire magic. If your blood bar gets low, your frenzy rises up, making your character prone to enter a state of uncontrollable rage.

Those simple facts become matters of life and death in combat, as a simple fight can turn into a total party wipe with thirsty characters. Vampire weaknesses, such as sunlight or fire, can make things go south pretty fast.

"The game is scaled back from the very early designs (as any game is), but storyteller mode was not something that we would have considered cutting. This was something that we wanted to introduce to the RPG world, and there's no better property for this type of moderated gameplay than *Vampire: The Masquerade*."

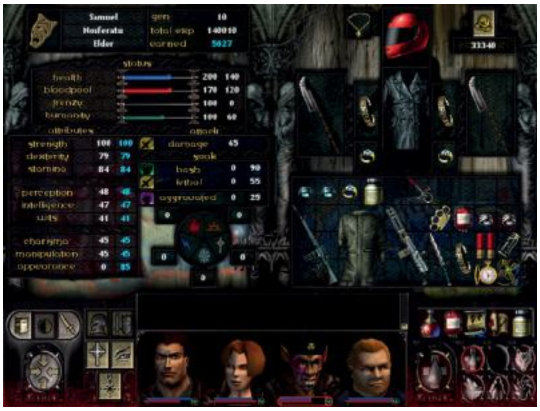
– Ray Gresko,
Redemption*'s project lead*


Ahzra
petalligator
petdarkhunter
petdemonhound
petghoulspider
pethopper
petrat
petskel_sword
petszlachta
petviper
petwolf
petzombu
pink
pink_bar
pink_running
player
praguesmithy
premysl
premysl_conv
premysl_conv2
premysl_conv3
premysl_conv4
premyslconvent
premyslconvent2
premyslconvent3
Christof
PREMYSL REVENANT

Storyteller mode allows for multiplayer campaigns controlled by a human GM, in a throwback to the tabletop games

Every vampire gets basic disciplines (such as feeding) but also more exotic ones linked to his/her clan. In *Redemption*, there are more than ten of those and each one unlocks up to five different powers. You get wolf form, fireballs, invisibility, summoning, celerity, cauldron of blood, etc. Combinations are pretty fun, and tailoring the disciplines used by your characters usually ends up being as important as the weapon they use, maybe more.

Items and enemies are pretty varied: swords and spiked maces turn into guns and flamethrowers in the modern era, each class of weapons affecting enemies differently. Non-vampiric enemies range from humans and ghosts to other monstrosities from the *World of Darkness* – the werewolf is probably the nastiest of all. While the game isn't very difficult, bosses are tough, usually spamming high-end disciplines and draining most of your resources.


Samuel
Nosferatu
Elder
status
health
bloodpool
frenzy
humanity
attributes
strength
dexterity
stamina
perception
intelligence
wits
charisma
manipulation
appearance
damage
soak
bash
lethal
aggravated

The game offers a wild variety of powers, armour, weapons and companions, both medieval and modern

The polarising gameplay aside, *Redemption* succeeded in offering a nice atmosphere through coherent art direction. The graphics have aged well, except the blocky-handed characters, and offer a nice vision of the *World of Darkness*. The sound design is creepy as hell and the soundtrack is fantastic: composed by two different artists to follow the story's division, the music is probably among the best in the genre. The medieval bits are dark and dreary while the modern elements rely on techno and rap vibes.

Only experienced by a few people, *Redemption*'s multiplayer was extremely original. More than a year before *Neverwinter Nights*, it tried to recreate the tabletop experience with an omnipotent storyteller as a host. The storyteller could change everything in the multiplayer sessions: add monsters, props, give experience points, etc. Unfortunately, only two scenarios were built within the core game and no user-friendly toolkits were given to the players.

Redemption is a schizophrenic game using a well-thought-out universe and a compelling narrative to promote a *Diablo* variation. It is definitively a good game and is worth a look. If you manage to get past the boring tutorial dungeon, then you will definitely enjoy yourself. **TR**

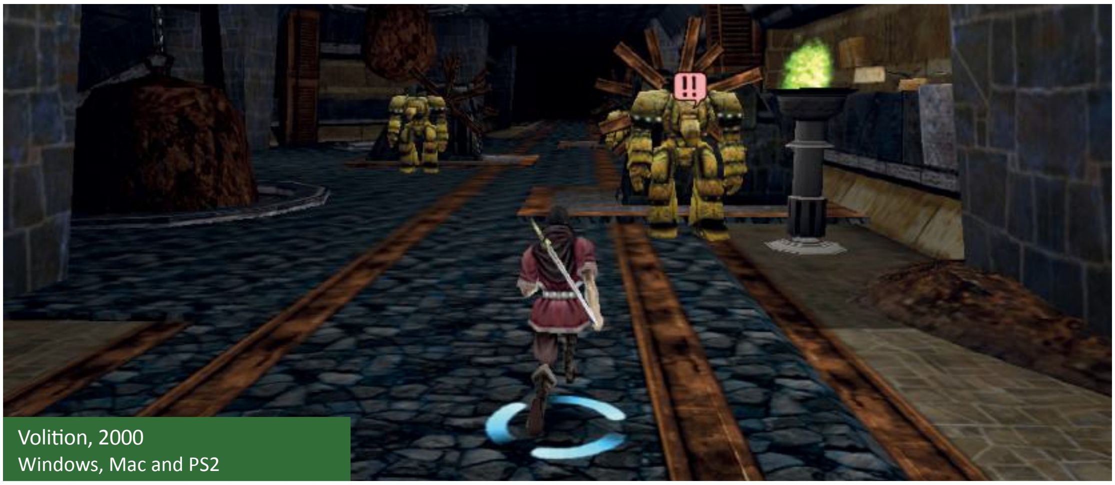
Mods:

The Age of Redemption 2014: Allows you to play the game's single-player campaign in multiplayer.

Within the Darkness: A huge mod that attempts to be more faithful to the source tabletop game.

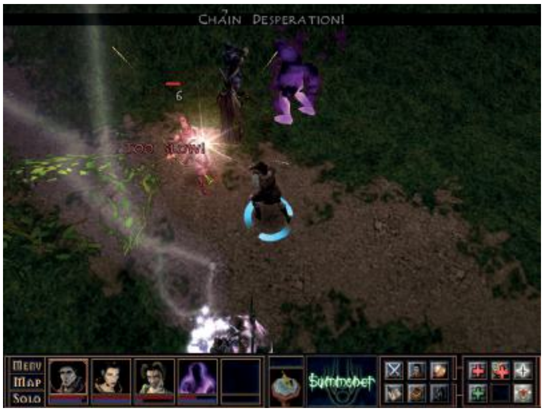
More mods can be found at: www.planetvampire.com

Summoner

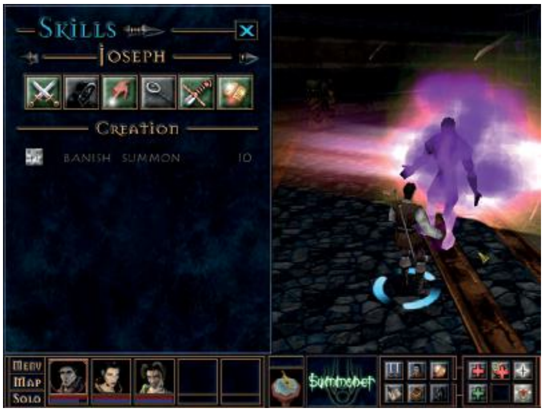

Volition, 2000
Windows, Mac and PS2

The first RPG developed by Volition, known today for their Red Faction and Saint's Row series, *Summoner* is rather obscure and forgotten for a variety of reasons. The game has long loading times, awkward combat, flawed AI, unfinished and unbalanced systems and not exactly impressive graphics. However, the setting, story and soundtrack reward you for getting through the long and clunky introduction.

***Summoner* was a launch title for the PS2 and was later ported to PC and Mac. Its 2002 sequel, *Summoner 2*, only came out for the PS2 and GameCube.**



Combat is real-time-with-pause, but based around timing your mouse clicks and key strikes to chain attacks



Each character has a variety of attacks and spells, but some also have unique skills, such as Joseph's summoning and Flece's sneaking and lock-picking

The game takes place on two different continents: Medeva (inspired by medieval Europe) and Orenia (reminiscent of China/Japan of the same period). Instead of creating yet another Tolkien-inspired fantasy setting, Volition tried to create its own, and while certain races and designs resemble the familiar concept, the rest of the lore remains rather original, which motivates you to explore the world and learn about its history and events, and the everyday lives of its characters.

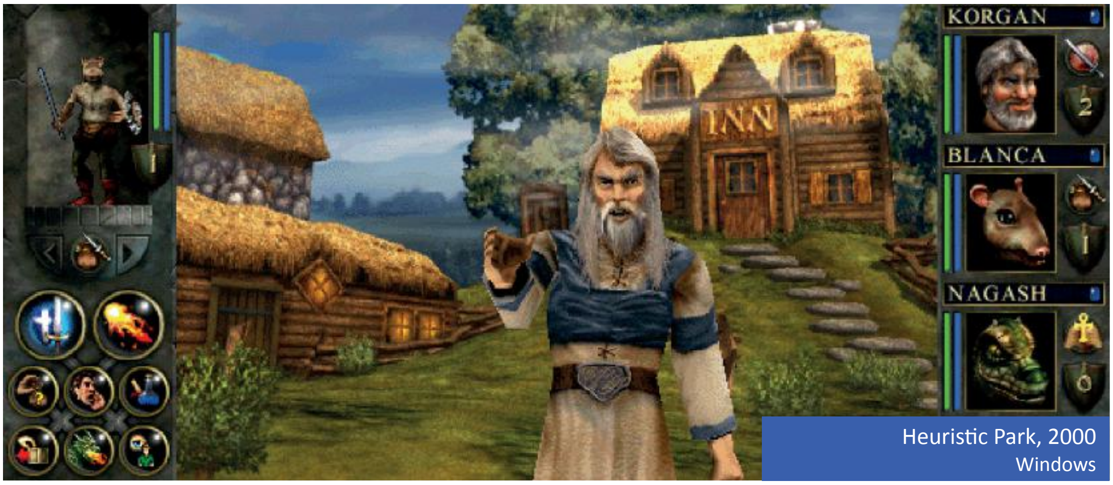
Summoner's story is centred on a young farmer named Joseph. Nine years after accidentally destroying his home village and promising to never use his summoning powers again, Joseph is living a peaceful life in the village of Masad. However, Orenian troops attack the village in search of a boy with the mark of a summoner. With his attempt to escape the village and find his old friend, Yago, begins Joseph's saga, filled with enough twists to keep you entertained until the final credits. Even if the story provides some genuine "I've seen this before" moments, it uses them wisely and sometimes pulls off rather unpredictable situations.

Even though the game is very linear and doesn't offer a lot of choices (which makes it feel like a JRPG sometimes), it offers surprisingly good side-quests. Some require thinking outside the box, and quite a few lead to additional lore details, surprising outcomes and hilarious situations, so don't hesitate to take your time and explore the world around you.

And last, but not least, *Summoner* moves away from traditional fantasy RPGs by replacing orchestral scores with an exciting electronic soundtrack.

If you can look past the exploitable combat system, poor AI and a number of annoying bugs, then give *Summoner* a chance. Its unique setting, interesting story, inspiring soundtrack and well-designed side-quests will pay off any frustration. **ZZ**

Wizards & Warriors



Heuristic Park, 2000
Windows

When D.W. Bradley, the architect behind *Wizardry V–VII*, left Sir-Tech and formed his own company, Heuristic Park, the first thing he released was *Wizards & Warriors*, his preemptive response to the upcoming *Wizardry 8*.

The two games are very similar in many ways – strong, traditional class-based character building, an open world full of dungeons to explore, quests to perform, characters to interact with and phase-based combat. The differences are in the details, but those details are what make these games.

The game's dungeons are excellent, some of the best ever designed and certainly far better than any in *Wizardry 8*. There are so many memorable and cleverly designed areas, some favourites being the Serpent Temple, Shurugeon Castle and the Boogre Lair (which features a thrilling prison breakout).

The combat, a mix of turn-based and real-time, is a fantastic answer to *Wizardry 8*'s unbearably cumbersome, fully turn-based phase system. You can freely act or walk around and enemies' turns will happen concurrently. For everyone who's ever gotten frustrated with *Wizardry*'s painfully slow battles, *Wizards & Warriors* will be a revelation.

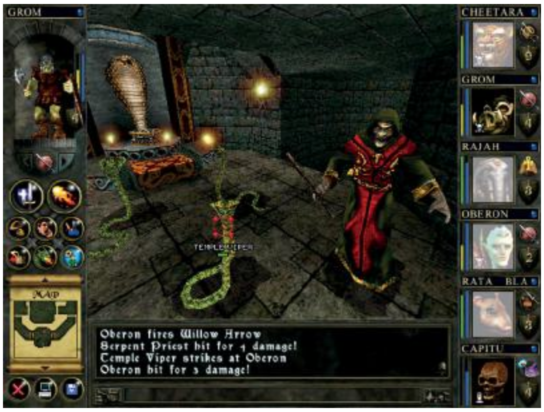
The most frustrating quality of the game is its world structure. The game presents large, non-linear areas that the player is free to explore as they want – until you end up where the game doesn't want you yet. *Wizards & Warriors* gates off huge areas until you've progressed far enough in the story to enter them, in the same way as the *Grand Theft Auto* games, a big step back from *Wizardry VII*'s fully open world.

The other major issue lies not in the game itself, but in the difficulty of getting it to run on modern computers. Several tweaks were required before the 2018 re-release, and even now it remains a bit finicky.

Regardless, with great combat and level design, a satisfying class and character customisation system (earn advanced classes by performing quests – why don't more games do this?) and a compelling, whimsical world with charming characters, it's at least as good as its nearest neighbour.

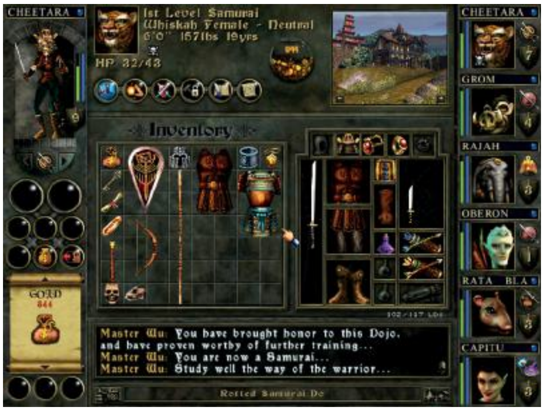
Don't overlook *Wizards & Warriors* just because *Wizardry 8* gets all the attention – you'll be surprised at how frequently *Wizardry* gets shown up! **ES**

***Wizards & Warriors* was re-released by GOG in 2018, making it easy to run on modern PCs, but we still recommend Ludmeister's Mod for its balance fixes.**



Oberon fires Willow Arrow
Serpent Priest hit for 4 damage!
Temple Viper strikes at Oberon
Oberon hit for 3 damage!

The excellent combat system blends turn-based actions with real-time movement, being both tactical and fast-paced

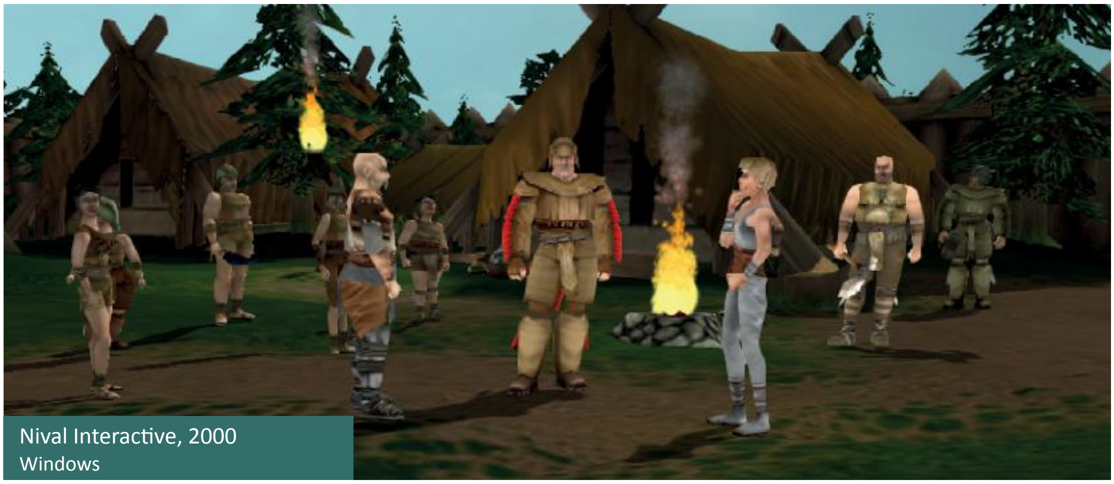


1st Level Samurai
Whiskah Female - Neutral
6'0" 157lbs 19yrs
HP 32/43

Master Wu: You have brought honor to this Dojo,
and have proven worthy of further training...
Master Wu: You are now a Samurai...
Master Wu: Study well the way of the warrior...

There are ten races and four basic classes to create your party from, plus 11 hidden classes you can unlock by completing certain quests or acting in a certain way

Evil Islands:
Curse of the Lost Soul



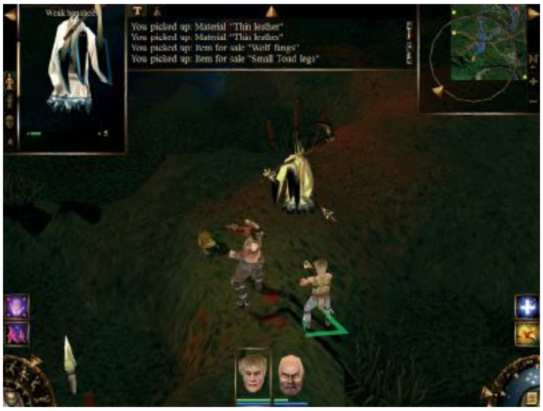
Nival Interactive, 2000
Windows

***Evil Islands: Lost in Astral* is a stand-alone expansion to *Evil Islands,* released in 2006 by Matilda Entertainment. It was very poorly received in Russia and never released in English.**

Like their earlier games, *Rage of Mages 1* and *2*, Nival's *Evil Islands* is an RTS/RPG hybrid (or "Role-Playing Strategy", as they called it), this time leaning more towards the RPG side.

The game opens with Zak, our protagonist, waking up amidst ruins on a mysterious island. Having no recollection of his past, armed only with a simple bronze dagger, he sets off to discover what happened to him. He soon comes across a village whose residents, awed by his metal dagger, proclaim him to be the Chosen One foretold by legend.

The tutorial area does a good job of explaining the mechanics behind *Evil Islands* – the combat system is real-time-with-pause, with a heavy emphasis on stealth. There are several kinds of movement: walking, the default normal speed; running, which quickly drains your stamina; sneaking and crawling, both of which conceal you from most enemies – provided you don't get too close to their line of sight. Moving stealthily also allows you to perform devastating backstabs, essential for taking out solitary guards and more powerful foes.



You picked up: Material "Thin leather"
You picked up: Material "Thin leather"
You picked up: Item for sale "Wolf fangs"
You picked up: Item for sale "Small Toad legs"

Combat can be very difficult, as a lucky critical hit from an enemy can kill a character; since death is permanent for your companions, you'll reload often

Many quests in the game hinge on you sneaking past enemies who can kill you in a few hits, so taking note of their positions and patrol routes is the key to victory. However, this doesn't mean the game is all about evading fights. When attacking, you are given a choice of targeting specific body parts: the head gives you a big damage bonus, but is the most difficult to hit; the torso is easier to hit but does little damage; the arms decrease attack and the legs decrease speed.

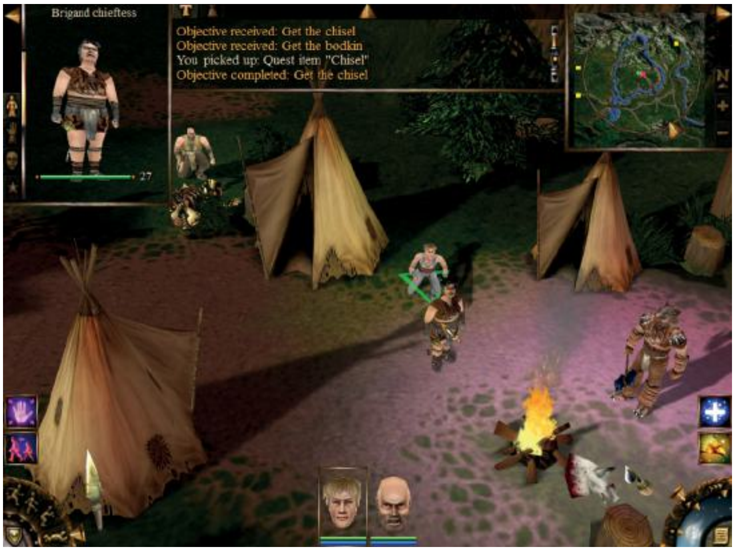
Health and stamina – used for both running and magic – regenerate over time and increase as you gain XP by defeating enemies and completing quests. The game use a classless character system, where XP is used to buy skills, ranging from melee, archery and magic to speeding up health regeneration, seeing better in the dark, being able to carry more weight, etc. There are three levels to each skill, and when you purchase one, all the other skills will increase in cost, so it's important to plan out what kind of character you want to build.

Evil Islands features a robust crafting system that will allow you to create your own gear and spells from schematics and keystones. The quality of equipment created depends on what kinds of material – bought or gathered from defeated creatures – were used in their construction. Crafted items can also be permanently enchanted with spells, such as Haste or Night Vision.

The Spell Maker allows you to alter the effects of spells, such as empowering them by adding runes that will give them extra duration and extra range, or changing them to only target enemy units, at the cost of making them harder and more expensive to cast.

Unlike many RPGs, where you're soon drowning in gold, money remains an issue up until the very end, so making use of custom-made items can be vital, especially if you are playing on the harder difficulty.

> "*Rage of Mages* taught us one important thing: we tried to pack it equally with both role-playing and strategy elements but found out that many people thought of the game as 'a man between two chairs', which didn't have enough of either in it. As a result, we learned that we should stress one element, e.g. role-playing, and enhance it with several elements from other genres, which would make its gameplay innovative and more immersive."
>
> *– Dmitry Zakharov,*
> Evil Islands*' lead designer*



Objective received: Get the chisel
Objective received: Get the bodkin
You picked up: Quest item "Chisel"
Objective completed: Get the chisel

Quests will often send you to deal with much stronger enemies; you'll have to steal items from them or sneak past them – rare in an RPG

Evil Islands' world is divided into several large and interconnected areas. They reset every time you leave them, but some actions – such as killing a key NPC – are permanent. The trick is that you can only change equipment and party members, craft or level up between areas, so you'll have to prepare yourself before heading out, then later head back to reap the rewards.

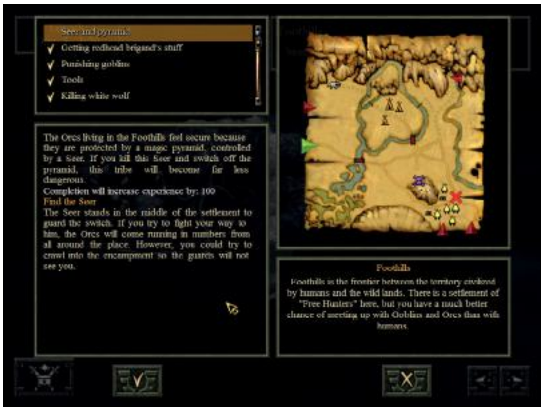
Over the course of the game, you will visit three distinct islands in search of your identity – primitive Gipath, snowy Ingos and desert-covered Suslanger. Each island also offers several companions who might join you, up to two at a time. Just beware that they won't follow you between islands and can die permanently.

While role-playing options are very limited, the quests are varied and involve, for example, stealing a lizardman holy relic, killing off a cyclops's pigs so he will leave the area, charming a dragon to clear out a nest of harpies for you, stealing a foreman's ledger so you can blackmail a trader, and many more.

This is helped in no small part by the quaint writing – characters all speak in an over-dramatised manner, and behave as if they are in a '80s cartoon. The voice acting is generally quite good and fitting, with the unfortunate exception of the main character, whose strange and overenthusiastic delivery will probably soon start to grate on your nerves.

The graphics are clear and distinguished-looking, featuring a dynamic weather system, day-night cycle, wounds that are visible on the character's model and tracks left behind by enemies so you can see which way they are heading. Overall, it still holds up today.

Even when released, there were objectively better RPGs than *Evil Islands*. While there is nothing revolutionary, it offers a vast, enjoyable world to explore, many hours of gameplay, a challenging combat system, and, most importantly, a fun-loving adventure from when games could still be whimsical without being ironic. **VL**

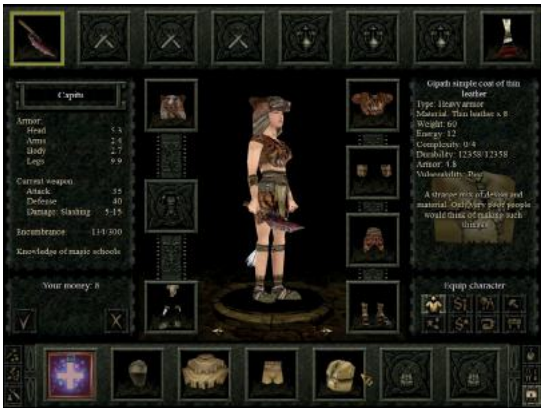


Seer and pyramid
- ✓ Getting redhead brigand's stuff
- ✓ Punishing goblins
- ✓ Tools
- ✓ Killing white wolf

The Orcs living in the Foothills feel secure because they are protected by a magic pyramid, controlled by a Seer. If you kill this Seer and switch off the pyramid, this tribe will become far less dangerous.
Completion will increase experience by: 100
Find the Seer
The Seer stands in the middle of the settlement to guard the switch. If you try to fight your way to him, the Orcs will come running in numbers from all around the place. However, you could try to crawl into the encampment so the guards will not see you.

Foothills
Foothills is the frontier between the territory civilized by humans and the wild lands. There is a settlement of "Free Hunters" here, but you have a much better chance of meeting up with Goblins and Orcs than with humans.

The core gameplay centres around acquiring quests in town and then travelling to their specific areas to complete them



Armor:
Head 5.3
Arms 2.4
Body 2.7
Legs 9.9

Current weapon:
Attack 35
Defense 40
Damage: Slashing 5-15

Encumbrance: 114/300

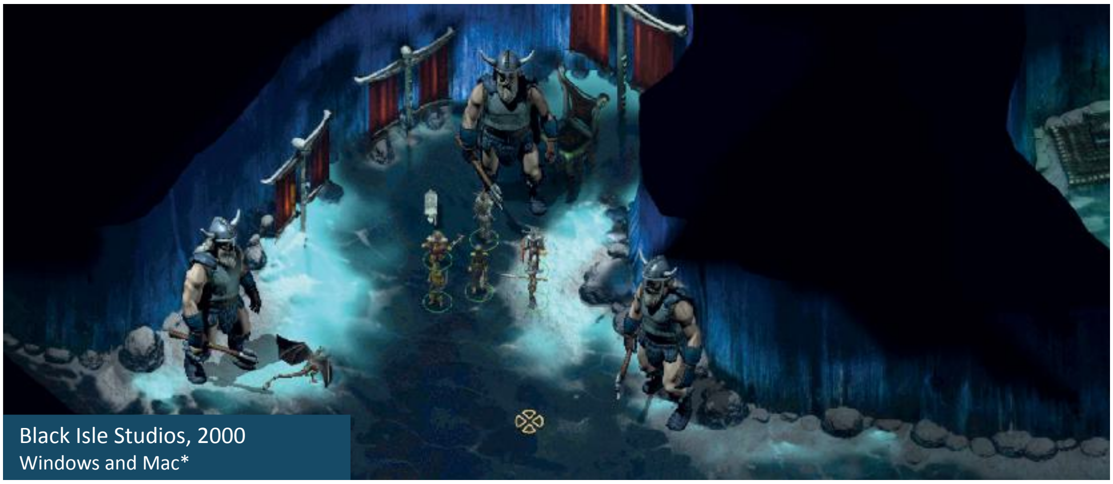
Knowledge of magic schools

Your money: 8

Gipath simple coat of thin leather
Type: Heavy armor
Material: Thin leather x 8
Weight: 60
Energy: 12
Complexity: 0/4
Durability: 12358/12358
Armor: 1.8

Evil Islands also has a multiplayer mode, which allows you to create a hero and do random quests with five friends

Icewind Dale



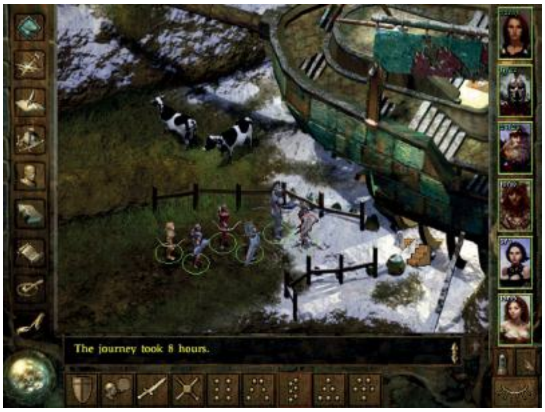
Black Isle Studios, 2000
Windows and Mac*

Despite having the same name, and setting, the game bears no relation to R.A. Salvatore's *The Icewind Dale Trilogy* novels starring Drizzt Do'Urden.

Playing a CRPG based on *Dungeons & Dragons* is reason enough to make me smile. That's exactly the case with *Icewind Dale*, a member of the great Infinity Engine family of outstanding games.

It's impossible to talk about *Icewind Dale* without mentioning the *Baldur's Gate* series. I first played *IWD* days after finishing *BG* and *BG2*, two games that completely changed my criteria and forged me as a gamer. Believe me, playing a good game shortly after experiencing two of the best games of all time makes a lot of difference. But make no mistake, despite being eclipsed by *Baldur's Gate II,* which was released in the same year (and by *Diablo II,* released on the exact same day), *Icewind Dale* manages to hold its own.

The game employs an enhanced version of the successful Infinity Engine – sporting some impressive areas and enemies. It makes thoughtful use of the rich Forgotten Realms lore and offers players a full party to customise. The campaign lasts from 60 to 80 hours, with a new random loot system encouraging replays and an elaborate story gracefully ornamented by Jeremy Soule's soundtrack – one of the best in gaming.



The journey took 8 hours.

You'll visit many unique locations, from slave pens and a cursed fortress to a gnome village and a giant magical tree

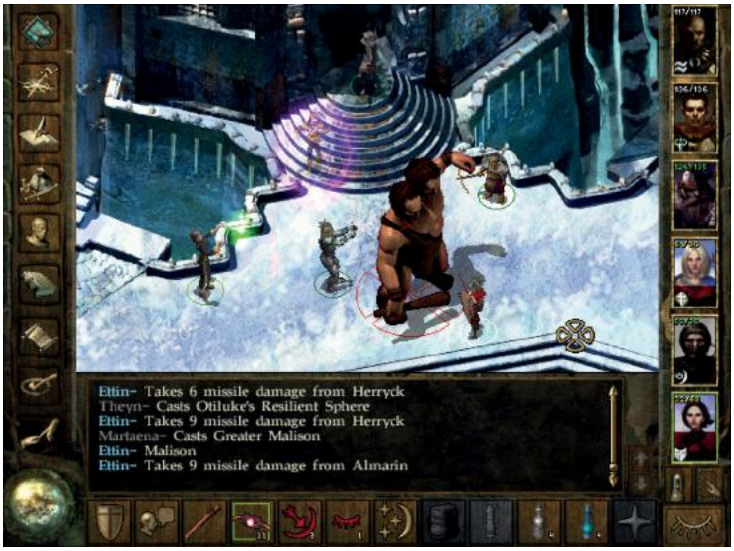
Instead of customising the main character and playing the role of Bhaal's child (like in *Baldur's Gate*), *Icewind Dale* gives you the opportunity to create and customise your entire group of adventurers – again a party of six characters. This apparently simple change has a deep impact on how the entire game flows – sometimes for better, other times for worse. The best thing is the freedom to combine any classes and races you want – for more strategic players, this is heaven. And come on, isn't it fun (and challenging) to play with a group entirely made of spellcasters?

However, there's a trade-off. To offer this level of freedom, the designers sacrificed the personal touch of playing a bigger role with the protagonist. Since the entire party plays the main role, there's no room for a single character to stand in the centre of the storyline. Plus, the fun of finding new companions and trying to make them happy is also gone. Of course, this doesn't ruin the game at all, but is something to be aware of. The game is clearly more focused towards dungeon-crawling, and works beautifully in this regard.

The game's journey takes place in the eponymous Icewind Dale, a sub-arctic region on the northernmost part of the Sword Coast. It's located near the Spine of the World, a massive mountain range known as a cold, deadly and evil creature-infested place. Your party begins in the city of Easthaven, where you join an expedition to investigate some strange happenings in the eastern city of Kuldahar.

It's doesn't take long for the first of many unpleasant surprises to occur: the expedition is ambushed by Storm Giants, who create an avalanche that kills the entire company, except for the player's party. The path back to Easthaven is blocked, forcing the party to venture forth to Kuldahar and start the main quest, given by Arundel, an Archdruid.

> "*Icewind Dale* was fantastic for me because I had somehow stumbled into my dream job. I didn't know anything about CRPG development, but I knew more about *AD&D* and the Forgotten Realms than anyone outside of TSR/WotC should. We didn't have any leads on the original title, so we sort of just ... did things ... with Chris Parker [the game's producer] telling us when we were being dumb."
>
> – *Josh Sawyer,*
> Icewind Dale*'s designer*

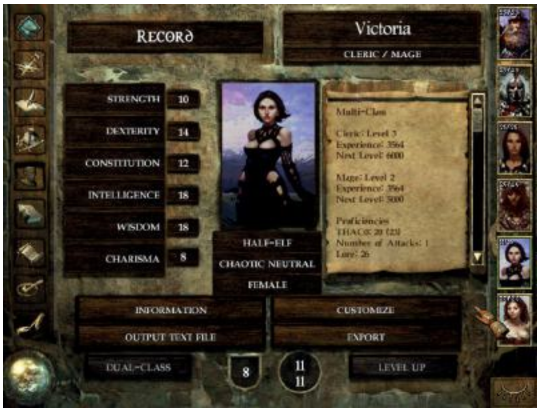

Ettin- Takes 6 missile damage from Herryck
Theyn- Casts Otiluke's Resilient Sphere
Ettin- Takes 9 missile damage from Herryck
Martaena- Casts Greater Malison
Ettin- Malison
Ettin- Takes 9 missile damage from Almarin

Icewind Dale focuses heavily on dungeon-crawling, with huge multi-level areas and over a hundred unique enemies and spells

Arundel is the first mentor found in the game, an important character responsible for almost every quest in the early chapters of the storyline. You'll also come across other interesting characters, like Revered Brother Poquelin, the demon Yxunomei and the Tempus Priest Everard.

Overall, the Forgotten Realms lore is very well explored and, for *D&D* fans, it's incredibly delightful to travel between locations. Some places I just loved, like the Severed Hand – not every game let you visit a cursed ruined fortress that represents an unsuccessful alliance between elves and dwarves.

The *Heart of Winter* expansion was released a few months later, sending players to stop a barbarian horde led by an undead warrior. The expansion added a few new features, such as the "Heart of Fury" difficulty setting, designed for hardcore players, and a few rule tweaks inspired by the 3rd edition of *D&D*, which had just been released.



Victoria
CLERIC / MAGE
STRENGTH 10
DEXTERITY 14
CONSTITUTION 12
INTELLIGENCE 18
WISDOM 18
CHARISMA 8
HALF-ELF
CHAOTIC NEUTRAL
FEMALE

Icewind Dale doesn't have recruitable NPCs – instead, it tasks players with creating a full of party of six characters

While *Heart of the Winter* was well-received, fans complained that its campaign was too short. So Black Isle released *Trials of the Luremaster,* a free downloadable expansion. A radical departure from the icy regions, it sent players to solve the mysteries of a large, haunted castle located in the Anauroch desert.

What stands out as one of the highlights of *Icewind Dale* is the excellent choice of locations and also the way the game makes you travel between interesting places, exploring an amazing region of Faerûn.

That's the main reason for me to play *Icewind Dale* again. But it's far from the only reason why you should play it – the teams at Black Isle and BioWare were like the mythical King Midas: everything they touched was transmuted into gold. **AO**

***In 2014, Beamdog released *Icewind Dale: Enhanced Edition*, a remaster of the game for modern computers, with new features, widescreen support and an iOS port.**

Mods:

Icewind Dale Fixpack: Fixes various bugs that weren't addressed by the official patches. Highly recommended.

Icewind Dale Tweak Pack: Contains a series of small changes, from cosmetic details like hiding helmets to various rule changes and new ease-of-use features.

Widescreen Mod: Allows resolutions over 800 × 600.

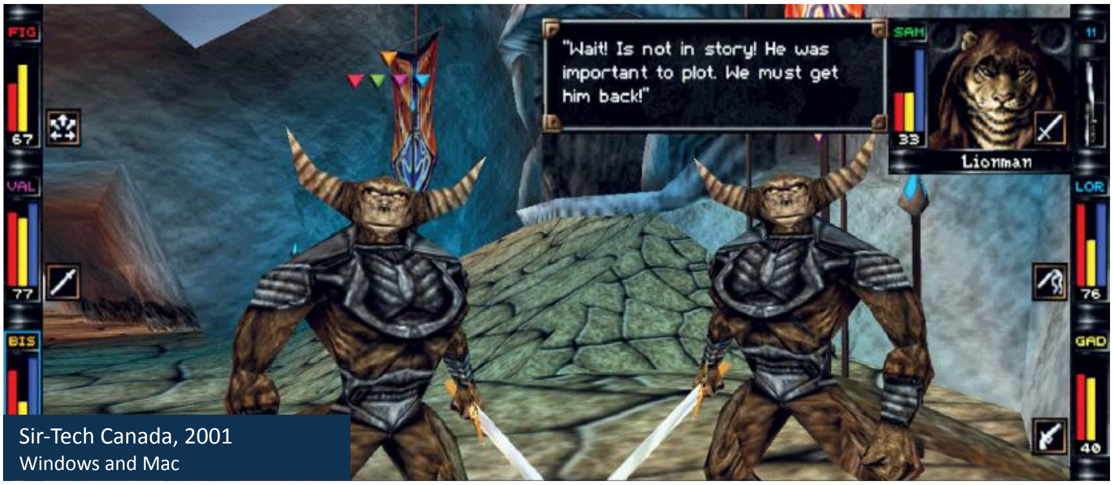
Unfinished Business: Restores content that was cut from the game, including dialogue, quests and items.

Auril's Bane: Adds a lot of new content, such as spells, items, creatures, AI scripts, stores and a new quest.

Item Upgrade for Icewind Dale: Allows you to upgrade some of the items in the game, as in *BG2.*

Icewind Dale in Baldur's Gate II: A conversion project that allows you to play *Icewind Dale* using the more popular *Baldur's Gate II* engine.

Wizardry 8



"Wait! Is not in story! He was important to plot. We must get him back!"

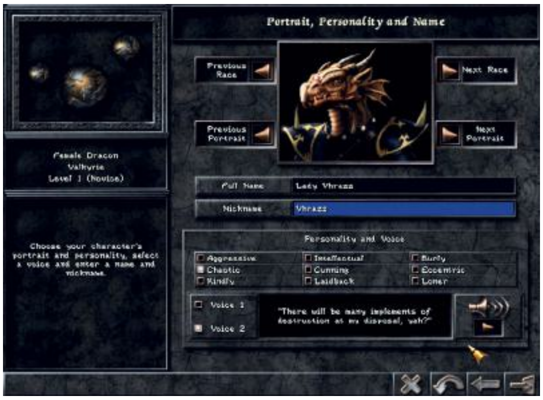
Sir-Tech Canada, 2001
Windows and Mac

The release of *Wizardry VII* in 1992 was a high point for the series, but also the beginning of Sir-Tech's downfall. Andrew Greenberg, one of *Wizardry*'s creators, sued the company over unpaid royalties – and the aftermath was chaotic.

Sir-Tech couldn't find a publisher for *Wizardry 8*, so they made an exclusivity deal with EB Games: the game was only sold at their stores, which severely limited its reach.

Sir-Tech closed down and reopened in Canada, while David W. Bradley left the company. A *Wizardry* sequel started to be developed in Australia under the name *Stones of Arnhem*, but the project got cancelled. They then tried to diversify, publishing titles such as *Armed & Delirious* and the *Realms of Arkania* series, as well as creating *Nemesis: The Wizardry Adventure* (1996) – a mediocre multimedia adventure/RPG that was *Wizardry* in name only. Things kept going badly, and by 1998 Sir-Tech was nearly bankrupt. They closed their publishing branch and kept working on two games: *Jagged Alliance 2* and a new, fully 3D *Wizardry* game.

The concept of a 3D *Wizardry* game – without its original creators or Bradley – seemed doomed to fail. Worse, the game was delayed for years, unable to secure a publisher. Sir-Tech was so starved for funds that it added in-game ads: every time you close *Wizardry 8*, an ad for Falcon Northwest Computers appears.



Portrait, Personality and Name

Female Dracon
Valkyrie
Level 1 (Novice)

Choose your character's portrait and personality, select a voice and enter a name and nickname.

Full Name: Lady Vhrazz
Nickname: Vhrazz

Personality and Voice

☐ Aggressive
■ Chaotic
☐ Kindly
☐ Intellectual
☐ Cunning
☐ Laidback
☐ Burly
☐ Eccentric
☐ Loner

☐ Voice 1
■ Voice 2

"There will be many implements of destruction at my disposal, yah?"

Wizardry 8 offers a rarely-seen depth in its character creation, and its personality system makes the custom characters more unique and memorable than many companions in modern RPGs

Somehow, despite all this, *Wizardry 8* is amazing. You start by creating a party of six characters, using an upgraded version of *Wizardry VII*'s already excellent system. With 11 races, 15 classes, 40 skills and over 100 spells, it allows for countless party builds. It also removed the need for dice-rolls – you just pick a race, and a class, then assign stats and skill points.

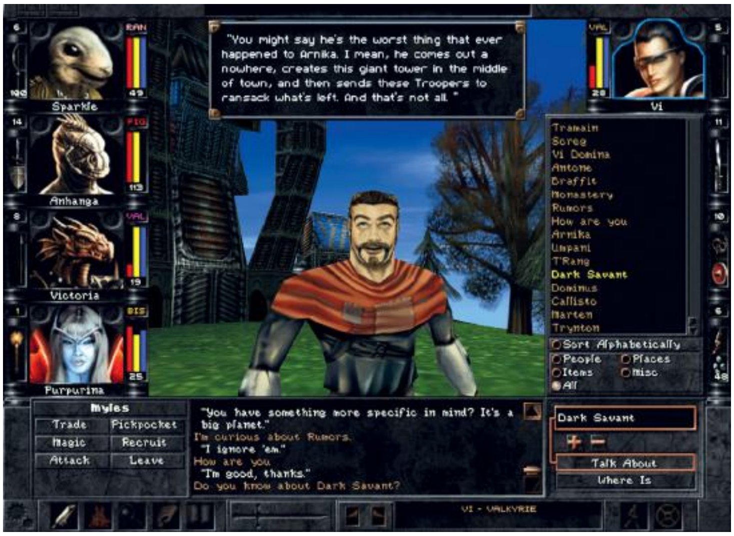
But what really sets character creation apart is the personality system. RPGs like *Baldur's Gate* allow you to pick voices for your characters, but *Wizardry 8* offers 36 personalities to choose from – such as Loner, Kind, Burly, Chaotic, etc. You can, for example, make an Eccentric Samurai Elf that talks in third-person, as if he were the narrator of the story. And he'll act that way during the entire game, reacting to battles, events, areas, deaths, etc. – all fully voiced! It's an amazing solution to allow custom yet memorable characters.

Once the game starts, you'll see that *Wizardry 8*'s transition to 3D was similar to *Might and Magic VI*'s: the party now moves freely across a large 3D world and enemies are visible in the distance, yet the game still plays like a blobber, with the party moving as a single unit. However, there's now a formation system, which greatly affects combat – if you place all your fighters at the front, the party's casters will be open to attacks from the sides or the rear. And that will happen often; true to its heritage, *Wizardry 8* is unapologetically hard.

The first few hours, when you create your party and explore the initial dungeon, are easily among the best starting hours in any RPG. The atmosphere is great, party banter is amusing, battles are challenging and the dungeon is filled with traps and secrets that feel natural in this new 3D presentation.

Sadly, as soon as you step out of the dungeon into the infamous Arnika Road, the game's biggest flaw will hit you right in the face: the filler combat.

> "We regularly sacrifice *Wizardry* virgins here at the office to test out new theories on them. Do they get it? Do they understand what we're trying to do? Is this easy for them or would it take 40 pages of a manual's help to comprehend? So far in our design, the game is clearly a *Wizardry*, believe me, Linda [Currie] and I would be super vocal if it weren't, but it does have new things, new touches, that people have wanted for years."
>
> *– Brenda Romero,*
> *Wizardry 8's designer*



"You might say he's the worst thing that ever happened to Arnika. I mean, he comes out a nowhere, creates this giant tower in the middle of town, and then sends these Troopers to ransack what's left. And that's not all."

"You have something more specific in mind? It's a big planet."
I'm curious about Rumors.
"I ignore 'em."
How are you
"I'm good, thanks."
Do you know about Dark Savant?

Sparkle
Anhanga
Victoria
Purpurina
Vi
Tramain
Soreg
Vi Domina
Antone
Braffit
Monastery
Rumors
How are you
Arnika
Umpani
T'Rang
Dark Savant
Dominus
Callisto
Marten
Trynton
○Sort Alphabetically
○People ○Places
○Items ○Misc
●All
Myles
Trade
Pickpocket
Magic
Recruit
Attack
Leave
Dark Savant
Talk About
Where Is
VI - VALKYRIE

The dialogue system is one of the richest in all RPG history: it's based on keywords that you can type in, factors in your reputation, allows you to trade, charm, steal or recruit NPCs – and it's fully voiced

The game's large, open world is connected by several roads and paths, crawling with monsters that not only respawn, but also scale to your level.

Moreover, while the phase-based combat does a great job at updating the series' formula, its animations are excruciatingly slow. Do not play *Wizardry 8* without using mods to hasten the animations, or you'll want to rage-quit every time a large group of enemies appear.

These flaws, combined with a spike in difficulty, is why many players never managed to cross Arnika Road. A shame, as *Wizardry 8* quickly recovers its brilliance.

Your goal is to reach the legendary Cosmic Forge (a story that began back in *Wizardry VI*), and this can be achieved by yourself or with the aid of some of the NPCs and warring factions that inhabit the world. Many quests offer multiple solutions, and the game's rich dialogue system provides plenty of flexibility – you can even recruit friendly NPCs, expanding your party up to eight characters. Just remember that they each have their own personalities and objectives.

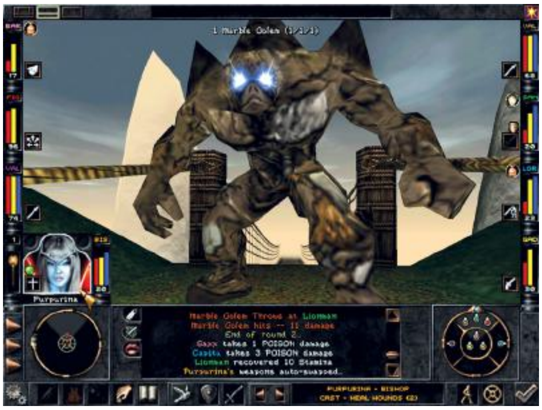
Wizardry 8 offers, but also demands, a lot from players – if you're clever, you can form a large alliance or play as a double-agent; if you're foolish, you might end up hated by everyone and be forced to fight your way through. It's not easy, but it's very rewarding.

Thus, *Wizardry 8* was praised by critics and loved by old-school fans, but never got popular. Regardless, it was too late – Sir-Tech had dissolved. More than a commercial title, the game became a farewell to fans.

For them, developers showed a great deal of care: you could import your party from *Wizardry VII*, starting in different areas depending on how you finished that game. It even ties loose ends for those who carried their party all the way from *Wizardry VI* – a game released over a decade earlier!

While series like *Ultima* and *Might and Magic* ended on a sour note, *Wizardry 8* is for many players the best entry in an already venerable series. It remains a lone star – no other RPG ever followed in its footsteps – but that only makes it shine even more brightly. **FE**

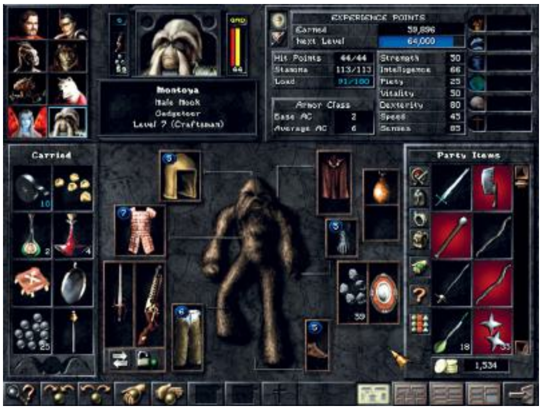
Several mods for *Wizardry 8* were made using the Cosmic Forge tool. We recommend starting with the *Wizardry 8* Enhancements mod, as it fixes animation speed and improves the overall balance of the game.



Marble Golem Throws at Lionman
Marble Golem hits -- 11 damage
End of round 2.
Saxx takes 1 POISON damage
Capita takes 3 POISON damage
Lionman recovered 10 Stamina
Purpurina's weapons auto-swapped.

1 Marble Golem (1/1/1)
Purpurina
PURPURINA - BISHOP
CAST - HEAL WOUNDS (2)

Combat feels like natural *Wizardry* evolution, adding formations, movement and a much more agile interface



Montoya
Male Mook
Gadgeteer
Level 7 (Craftsman)

Earned 39,896
Next Level 64,000
Hit Points 44/44
Stamina 113/113
Load 91/100
Strength 50
Intelligence 66
Piety 25
Vitality 50
Dexterity 80
Speed 45
Senses 85
Base AC 2
Average AC 6

EXPERIENCE POINTS
Armor Class
Carried
Party Items
1,534

Wizardry 8 gives detailed information to its players, with inventory, stats, spells and skills spread across four pages

Anachronox

Ion Storm, 2001
Windows

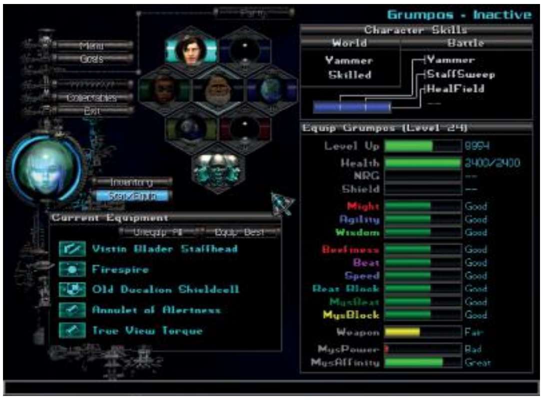
Anachronox* has such striking storytelling that its cinematic director, Jake Hughes, later edited all the game's cutscenes into a two-hour machinima movie, named *Anachronox: The Movie.

Is uncontrollable babbling a viable combat option? Can a planetary object be a viable party member? Is male exotic dancing a reliable way to earn money in RPGs? How come one of the best Japanese RPGs was developed in the West? Play *Anachronox* and all of the above will be answered.

Released by Ion Storm studios right after *Daikatana*'s massive failure and *Deus Ex*'s huge critical success, *Anachronox* never got the attention it deserved, despite the fact that it's the second (and, sadly, last) great game developed by the studio. Designed and directed by Tom Hall, *Anachronox* is a story- and character-driven adventure/RPG with a lot of humour, emphasis on exploration, and combat reminiscent of that in Japanese console RPGs.

The game was built on the *Quake II* engine, which was already outdated by 2002, and the character progression system is nothing to write home about, yet somehow *Anachronox* is one of my most memorable experiences in gaming.

Why is that, you ask? Because interacting with the world and its various characters is nothing short of delightful.


Party
Menu
Goals
Collectables
Exit
Inventory
Stats/Equip
Grumpos - Inactive
Character Skills
World
Battle
Yammer
Skilled
Yammer
StaffSweep
HealField
Equip Grumpos (Level 24)
Level Up
8954
Health
2400/2400
NRG
Shield
Might
Agility
Wisdom
Beefiness
Beat
Speed
Beat Block
MysBeat
MysBlock
Weapon
MysPower
MysAffinity
Good
Fair
Bad
Great
Current Equipment
Unequip All
Equip Best
Vistin Blader Staffhead
Firespire
Old Ducalion Shieldcell
Annulet of Alertness
True View Torque

Customising your characters comes down to the use of accessories and, more importantly, equipping MysTech, which provides unique and powerful abilities

As soon as I entered the universe of *Anachronox* I was swept into an unforgettable cyberpunk world, where danger, action and humour go hand-in-hand. The presentation and art direction are excellent. Areas ooze with atmosphere and variety. The camera work is exceptional and certainly groundbreaking for the time, while the moody electronic music offers some really memorable tracks.

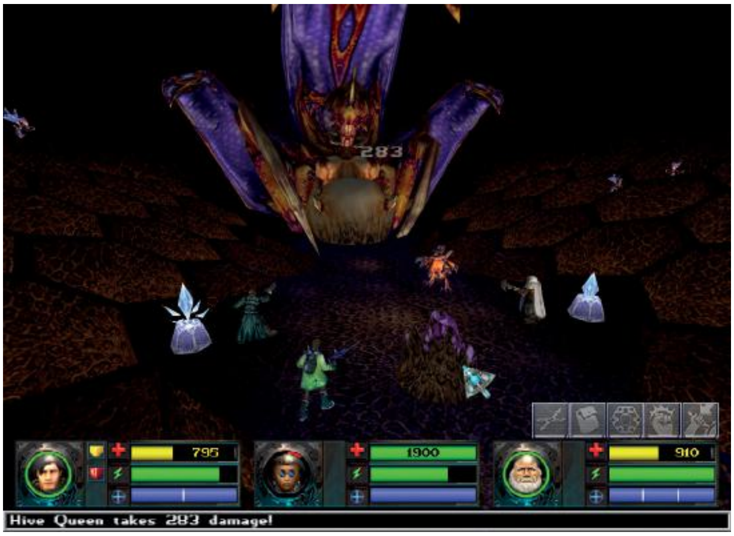
You play as Sylvester "Sly Boots" Bucelli, once a hotshot PI, now a down-on-his-luck drunkard, owing a big debt to the local crime lord. His only companions are his deceased secretary (digitised into a flying assistant, which also doubles as part of the UI) and a robotic sidekick without batteries.

Trying to find a job worthy of his deductive skills (and to prove that he's more than just a bum with a storage space for an office) he stumbles upon the elusive MysTech, a technology left behind by an ancient alien race. Along the way, Sly will meet a grumpy old man, a heretic scientist, an old flame, an alcoholic ex-hero and other, even more exotic characters.

The writing is brilliant, with enough science-fiction discussion to spur my curiosity about the theories mentioned. More importantly, *Anachronox* is one of the funniest games ever created, but it knows when to break the chuckles up with its fair share of heart-wrenching tragedy. The game's biggest accomplishment is that it manages to strike a sublime balance between humour, cyberpunk-noir intrigue and dramatic space opera.

From the start you feel part of a grand space adventure, in which even the most improbable people and places are believable. The depth of the characters and lore are remarkable, especially for a game that at the same time manages to make you chuckle or laugh out loud every two minutes or so.

> "I wanted to bring strong characters and a bizarre, epic story onto the PC, really, a console-style RPG to the PC. I was strongly influenced by *Chrono Trigger* – a classic game. I wanted the characters to really have things happen that were important to them, and to create a new, consistent universe."
>
> – *Tom Hall,*
> Anachronox*'s creator*



Hive Queen takes 283 damage!

The combat system is heavily inspired by JRPGs, but places a great deal of importance on movement; for example, melee characters must move near enemies to attack

Instead of random encounters, battles are all scripted and tied to a believable world. The combat system should be familiar to anyone who has played Japanese RPGs, with characters facing off against enemies on a separate field. There is a small amount of tactical thought involved, since movement is hindered by the limited size of the combat board.

An initiative bar gradually builds up for each character and they can act once it's full, just as in the classic *Final Fantasy* ATB system. Possible actions include attacks, special skills or magic, the use of items, moving to a different spot on the board or, in some rare cases, manipulating the environment to your advantage. There is hardly any enemy AI to speak of, but it is still a great idea to protect your weaker characters.

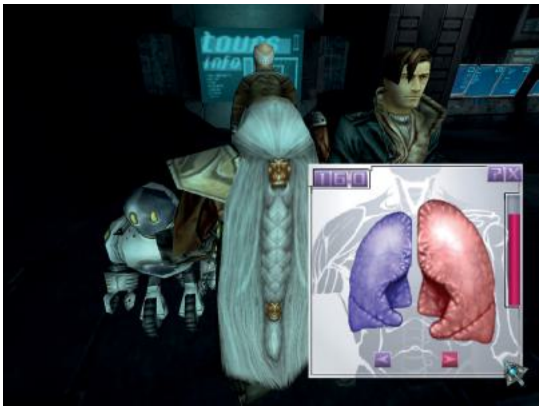
Outside combat, you explore the multiple worlds of *Anachronox* from a third-person view, interacting with its various seedy residents to receive information, quests and lots of verbal abuse.

As you gather more companions, you'll find out that each one has their own special abilities, which can be used in combat, quest-solving and uncovering secret areas. Lock-picking, hacking and aggressive jabbering are only few of the skills that will be at your disposal. These unique skills can be upgraded if the right trainers or means are discovered.

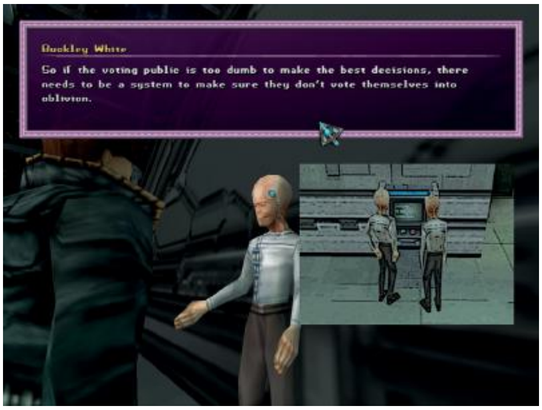
Like any decent PI, you'll also have to use your camera to photograph clues and evidence needed for your assignments. *Anachronox* is big and ripe for exploration, and as you move on through the game you'll eventually get access to space travel and other planets. The game offers a huge world with a lot of content and nary a dull moment.

It is obvious that *Anachronox* was a labour of love, created under circumstances that allowed free rein to creativity and encouraged ambitious goals. It's one of those unique games that takes you into its world and leaves a lasting impression. In conclusion, this is a fun experience you shouldn't miss. **GD**

***Anachronox*'s storyline ends in a cliffhanger of sorts, as the game was planned to be longer, but had to be cut due to time constraints. A sequel/expansion was planned, but the game's sales were poor. Tom Hall still often talks about returning to finish it.**



You'll come across several mini-games; some are tied to skills, like lock-picking, but others are much more unusual



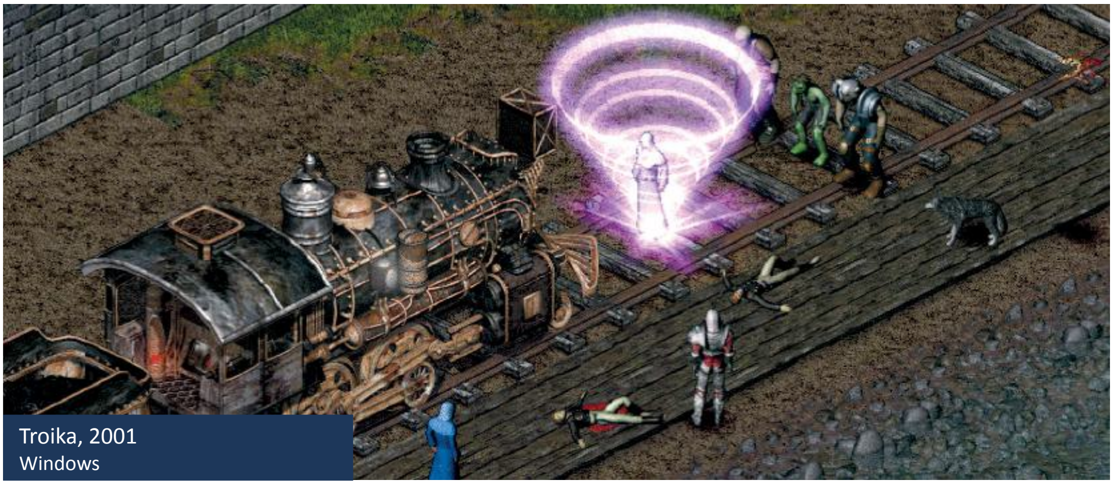
Buckley White

So if the voting public is too dumb to make the best decisions, there needs to be a system to make sure they don't vote themselves into oblivion.

Anachronox's writing manages to achieve a great mix of humour, drama, hard sci-fi and epic space opera

Arcanum:

Of Steamworks & Magick Obscura



Troika, 2001
Windows

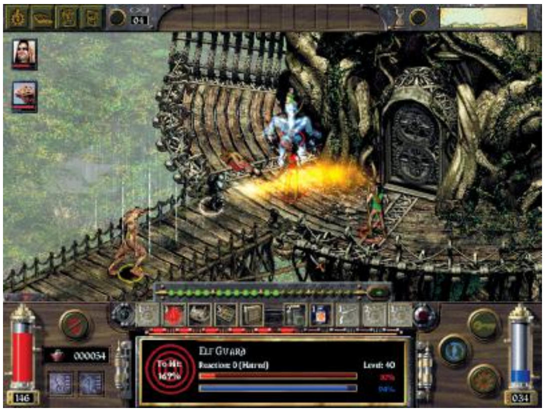
A sequel to *Arcanum* was planned, titled *Journey to the Centre of Arcanum*. Inspired by Jules Verne's novel, it was to be created in Valve's Source Engine but Troika failed to secure the necessary funding.

Arcanum, in my opinion, offers the most complete role-playing experience of any CRPG ever created. The breadth and depth of mechanics and content ensure that one playthrough just won't be enough. Two or three won't cut it either.

The diversity of character options is immense, not just at character creation, but in the gameplay and dialogue choices throughout the huge open world of *Arcanum*.

Creating a character in *Arcanum* is a very involved experience. The system is classless, but there are no fewer than eight races and over 50 backgrounds to choose from, allowing you to tailor your character to very specific tastes and also getting you into the role-playing spirit.

The effects of backgrounds range from the minor to the extreme. If you just want to tinker a little or add some flavour to your character, you could be an apprentice to a shopkeeper or a halfling orphan for some minor bonuses and penalties. But if you want to go all in, you could be a supermodel, or an idiot savant or even a Frankenstein's monster with huge bonuses and penalties across multiple stats and skills.



Combat is the weakest part of *Arcanum*: it can be fought in real-time or turn-based modes, using action points, but neither really works well

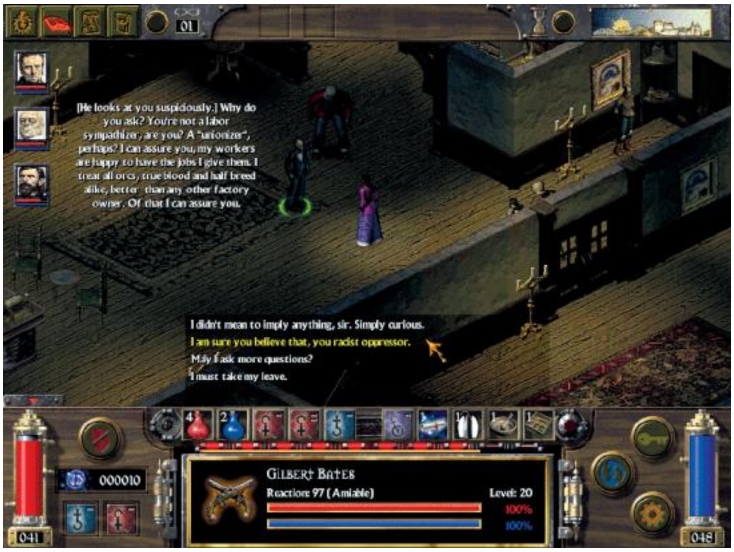
When you're finished creating your avatar, the opening cinematic plays. You are aboard the IFS Zephyr, a zeppelin on its maiden voyage from Caladon to Tarant, when it is attacked and shot down by two "strange flying machines" (i.e. planes) piloted by Orcs. At the crash site, you talk to a dying gnome who gives you a silver ring and tells you to "find the boy". You are then engaged by a fellow named Virgil, a recent convert to the Panarii religion, who claims you are the reincarnation of the ancient god Nasrudin. Virgil offers to accompany you to the nearby town of Shrouded Hills to meet his superior, and your journey through the world of *Arcanum* begins.

Arcanum boasts a huge number of quests with several ways to resolve them, usually using the trio of solutions established by *Fallout* – combat, stealth and diplomacy. The complex character system adds a lot of depth here, as a beautiful elf in an elegant dress will have an easier time getting a murderer to confess, but an ugly mage can still try a charm spell, or even use necromancy to get testimony from his victims.

The world is massive and very open, with few gates to pass through. There are many optional locations scattered across the map to stumble upon, from the altars of old and forgotten gods to ancient dungeons, hidden villages and a few Easter eggs.

A lot of smaller touches really add to the charm of *Arcanum*. For example, every skill in the game has an associated master. You'll have to find them and often do a special quest for them if you wish to be trained. You will also see your own actions, or the consequences of them, as headlines in the Tarantian, the most popular newspaper in *Arcanum*. You'll read and hear various rumours as well, that serve both as leads into obscure side-quests and as subtle hints about future areas and the game's antagonist.

> "Leonard [Boyarsky], Jason [Anderson] and I had made character systems before, but, in the case of *Arcanum*, we wanted the system to reflect the setting. This meant that not only would there need to be magic spells and technological skills of some kind, but there would need to be a mechanic that measured the character's aptitude with each. We wanted the struggle between the magic and tech that was taking place in the world to exist within every character as well."
>
> *– Tim Cain,*
> Arcanum*'s project leader*
> *and lead programmer*


[He looks at you suspiciously.] Why do you ask? You're not a labor sympathizer, are you? A "unionizer", perhaps? I can assure you, my workers are happy to have the jobs I give them. I treat all orcs, true blood and half breed alike, better than any other factory owner. Of that I can assure you.

I didn't mean to imply anything, sir. Simply curious.
I am sure you believe that, you racist oppressor.
May I ask more questions?
I must take my leave.

Gilbert Bates
Reaction: 97 (Amiable)
Level: 20

Arcanum's world feels alive and believable, with issues being born out of political, economic, ideological and racial conflicts, not of "good versus evil"

Arcanum's setting is quite unusual for a CRPG. It is high fantasy set during the Industrial Revolution, resulting in a widespread conflict – the dichotomy between Magic and Technology. This conflict is the lens through which much of the game's content is seen and it is reinforced within the gameplay itself; your dwarven technologist might craft swords and pistols from scrap, but magic spells and potions aren't going to have much effect on him; and your highly magical half-elf better learn to teleport, because he won't be allowed to board trains anymore.

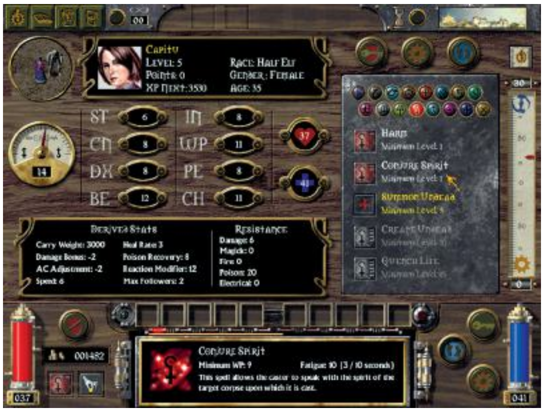
The scope and scale of *Arcanum* are astounding, and so it's hardly surprising that it was shipped somewhat unfinished and quite buggy. Combat suffered the most, because of Sierra's demands that a real-time mode be implemented alongside the intended turn-based mode. As a result, combat is quite unsatisfactory and unbalanced, becoming a chore during some of the larger, combat-filled dungeons.

On the bright side, Sierra did supply Troika with the talents of Ben Houge, who composed one of the most memorable, sophisticated and thoughtful soundtracks ever produced for a game. His string quartet pieces set a relaxed pace while managing to capture a sense of the grand scale of *Arcanum*. This, married with the 19th-century steampunk aesthetic, creates a thoroughly enjoyable atmosphere.

Arcanum's greatest achievement is giving the player a real sense of agency. It is perhaps gaming's greatest strength but so few games, let alone RPGs, deliver on it. There is conflict everywhere and you have the power not only to solve these conflicts, but to prey upon them or exacerbate them according to your desires and skills.

More than any other title before or since, *Arcanum* showed us what CRPGs could be. Although it did not achieve all that it set out to achieve, the vision and ambition of Troika's debut is remarkable. **JM**

The *Arcanum Multiverse Edition* is a massive mod pack with some of the best fixes and changes made by fans. It's highly recommended, even for a first playthrough.


Capitu
Level: 5
Points: 0
XP Next: 3530
Race: Half Elf
Gender: Female
Age: 35

ST 6
IN 8
CN 8
WP 11
DX 8
PE 8
BE 12
CH 11

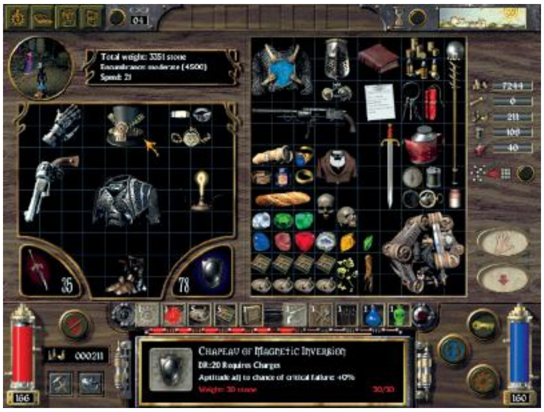
Derived Stats
Carry Weight: 3000
Damage Bonus: -2
AC Adjustment: -2
Speed: 6
Heal Rate: 3
Poison Recovery: 8
Reaction Modifier: 12
Max Followers: 2

Resistance
Damage: 6
Magick: 0
Fire: 0
Poison: 20
Electrical: 0

Harm
Minimum Level: 1
Conjure Spirit
Minimum Level: 1

Conjure Spirit
Minimum WP: 9
Fatigue: 10 (3 / 10 seconds)
This spell allows the caster to speak with the spirit of the target corpse upon which it is cast.

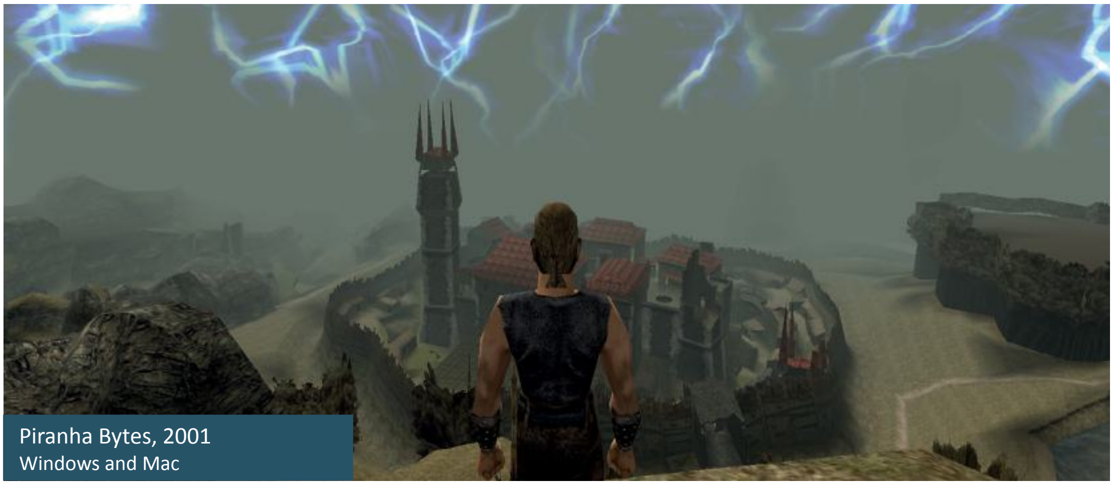
The character system is extensive, with various attributes, skills, schools of magic and technological disciplines


Total weight: 3351 stone
Encumbrance: moderate (4500)
Speed: 21

Chapeau of Magnetic Inversion
DR:20 Requires Charges
Aptitude adj to chance of critical failure: 40%
Weight: 30 stone
30/30

You'll find a wild range of items, from ancient magical swords to electrical top hats, all beautifully rendered

Gothic



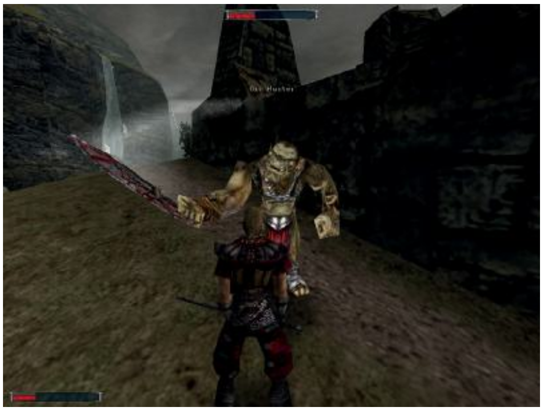
Piranha Bytes, 2001
Windows and Mac

Gothic supports widescreen resolutions without the need for mods, but you must set this directly in the game's .ini file.

Gothic came literally out of nowhere in 2001, and, in my view, set a whole new standard for single-character hiking simulators, a.k.a. "The Piranha Bytes RPG". Funny how the developers didn't even label it as an RPG at its release.

When talking about why *Gothic* was something fresh and unique when it was published, it's definitely important to start with the setting and story, since it's essentially *Escape from New York* … with swords! You're just a bloke, who's nameless for all intents and purposes because nobody even lets you introduce yourself. You're thrown into a prison mining colony surrounded by a one-way-entry forcefield, where the prisoners have managed to rebel, taking over the whole establishment. After that, you are beaten senseless ("baptised") by a bunch of guards and left on your own.

The premise in *Gothic* is a very good hook because it presents a mix of low-key matters within a fairly unusual setting. It also manages to uphold this through to the end: as even though bigger and more fantastical events start happening, your character's only motivation is basically to get the hell out of the colony.



Combat is quick and deadly: you can perform front, left and right attacks, block, and, with training, chain attacks together

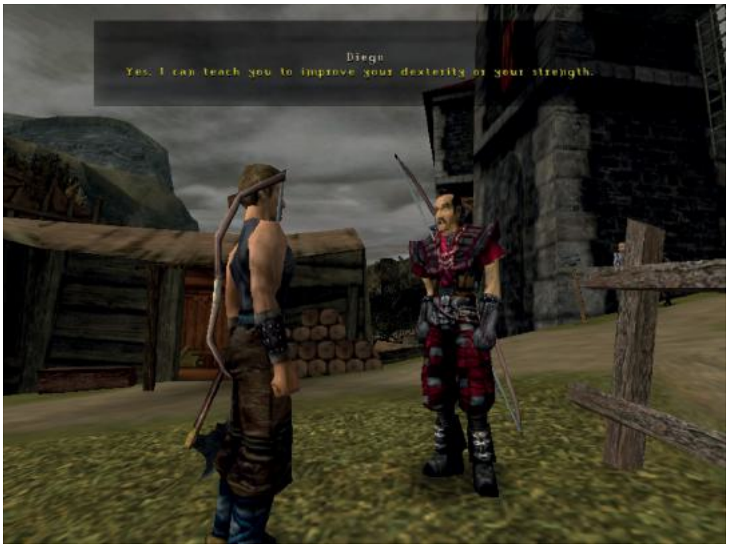
The general writing style, which would stick with Piranha Bytes henceforth, also emphasised the dichotomy between the vulgar and the fantastical very well, as you'll be coming across various really colourful characters, who are, on the one hand, rather stereotypical – pompous mages, brutal thugs, dumb peons – but on the other, extremely believable and amusing.

But *Gothic*'s biggest strength is not just showing you this strange prison colony, but also letting you visit its every nook and cranny. The world of *Gothic* is simply massive, as well as beautiful, with tons of places to check out, beasts to murder, secret caverns to penetrate and ancient tombs to raid. And above all, it was handcrafted, full of verticality and almost without barriers, so you can just go off and explore whatever you want – provided you can survive.

And that is where *Gothic* is tricky, because surviving is a lot harder than in most games. You know it isn't fooling around when your first opponent is a turkey that can horribly murder you in a few hits. And it was this ridiculous brutality that gave the game most if its unique charm. It simply didn't cut you any slack. If you wanted to get somewhere, you had to work for it, and the simple thought that straying off the beaten path could mean certain death made every step into the wilderness something special. Especially at night. Through a forest. With no map.

The key to thriving was to quickly get better gear, beg people to train you in combat and master the fighting system, which I consider one of the best in action RPG history. At first it seems clunky and unresponsive, but, once you get accustomed to it and take on harder opponents, every fight becomes an adrenaline-pumping effort in which every mistake could mean death. Various enemies will also fight in different ways, and force you to adopt new tactics.

> “We wanted to create a living world, so we decided to make it small and interesting, rather than very large and boring. And instead of a bright fairy-tale atmosphere, we preferred to create a dark and gloomy setting. Combine these two things and you end up with a prison camp surrounded by a magical barrier.”
>
> *– Alex Brüggemann,*
> *Piranha Bytes co-founder*
> *and* Gothic*’s designer*



Diego

Yes, I can teach you to improve your dexterity or your strength.

To succeed, you must not only work for the factions, but also earn the respect of individuals, so they might agree to help or train you

The final outstanding quality of *Gothic* is its character system and how it ties into the game and story. Sure, you could gain massive XP from monsters and quests, but once you level up, essentially nothing happens. You just get a bunch of skill points that require visits to specific trainers who could teach you, but only to the best of their capabilities – if they even respect you in the first place.

Furthermore, while your character starts as a classless bloke, to actually acquire a specific class you need to join one of the three very distinct factions, each of which has its own agenda and quests. Not only is this very neat, because tying the levelling to the narrative is a nice throw-back to pen-and-paper, but also because it piles up many layers of choices and consequences. You might agree with one faction, but joining it will prevent you from learning something from another, or completing quests for the third, etc.

Gothic allows you to climb on ledges, offering a level of verticality and exploration that few other RPGs provide

I’d be lying if I said that I wasn’t an obnoxious fan of Piranha Bytes’ RPG formula. I remember how amazed I was by the openness of the world, the feelings of seclusion and the brutality of the entire setting in just about all aspects when I played it for the first time. I also remember how glad I was when they took all that and made it even better in *Gothic II*. After that, both the series and the developer would start meandering, but, no matter what happened, it could never take the first two games away from me.

And while the sequel very much improved everything from *Gothic*, skipping this one “because it’s the same but a bit less” would be criminal. Honestly, both games are just parts of one great whole, and you can’t have one without the other. **DR**

In 2019 THQ Nordic released a playable teaser of a *Gothic* remake, featuring the game’s first area. The company has since confirmed that a full remake is in the works.

Mods:

Unofficial Patch: Fixes most of the few bugs left.

Player Kit: A handy tool that allows you to run and manage *Gothic*’s mods. Required for some mods.

Textures Patch: Offers higher-resolution textures, mostly made based on *Gothic II*’s native ones.

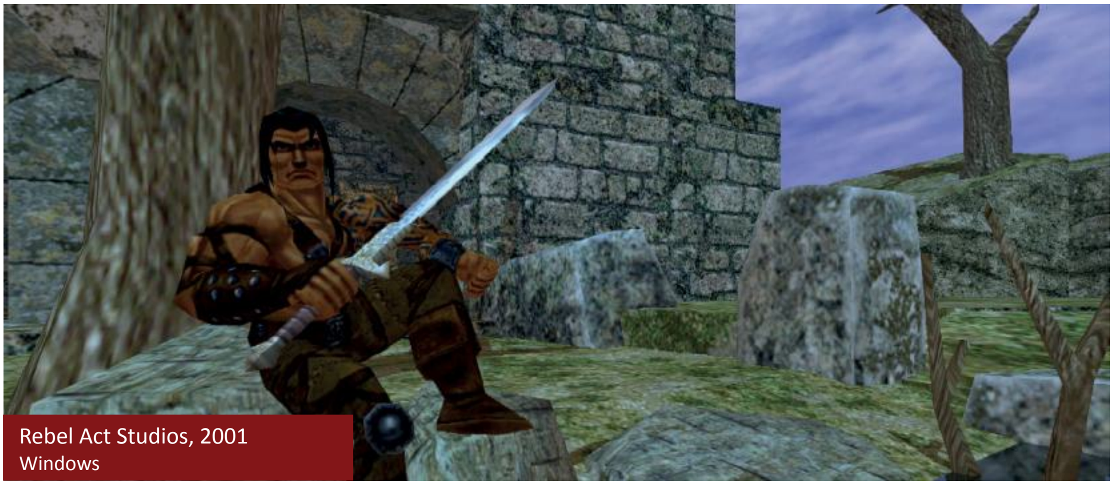
Golden Mod: Restores cut content, adding alchemy, a few new quests and items and a new area, while also making the whole game less linear. Great for a replay.

The Trial: Adds a new short adventure about a Count accused of massacre and allows you to recruit NPCs.

Dark Mysteries: A fan-made expansion for *Gothic*, with new areas, quests, items, NPCs and features.

Diccuric: A huge mod with an entirely new campaign and world, both about the same size as the original game. Uses improved graphics, taken from *Gothic II*.

Severance:
Blade of Darkness



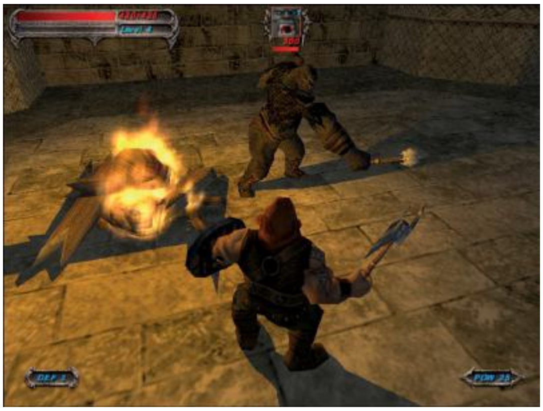
Rebel Act Studios, 2001
Windows

An Xbox port/remake called *Ultimate Blade of Darkness* was under development, but Rebel Act closed down in 2002 after weak sales. Former members founded MercurySteam and developed the *Castlevania: Lords of Shadow* series.

Made by the Spanish studio Rebel Act Studios, *Severance: Blade of Darkness* (also known as *Blade: The Edge of Darkness)* is an interesting hack-and-slash game, with a very strict sense of timing and a high difficulty, and which heavily relies on CRPG aesthetics and conventions.

The story is pretty clichéd but does the job: a dark god is going to escape from his prison and it's up to you to put him back in his place, using the fabled Blade of Darkness.

In a straight-up *Gauntlet* fashion, four characters are available, each having their own strengths and weaknesses. The Amazon is an extremely fast and nimble fighter who specialises in bows and lances, but she is also very frail. The Knight is a balanced character using a sword-and-shield fighting style, and can equip some of the best armour in the game. The sluggish Barbarian is a powerhouse, using gigantic two-handed swords and having plenty of combos. Last but not least, the Dwarf is an unsinkable tank, but his lack of combos and his short reach make him the hardest character to master.



The lighting engine remains impressive to this day, a great accomplishment for a small independent Spanish studio

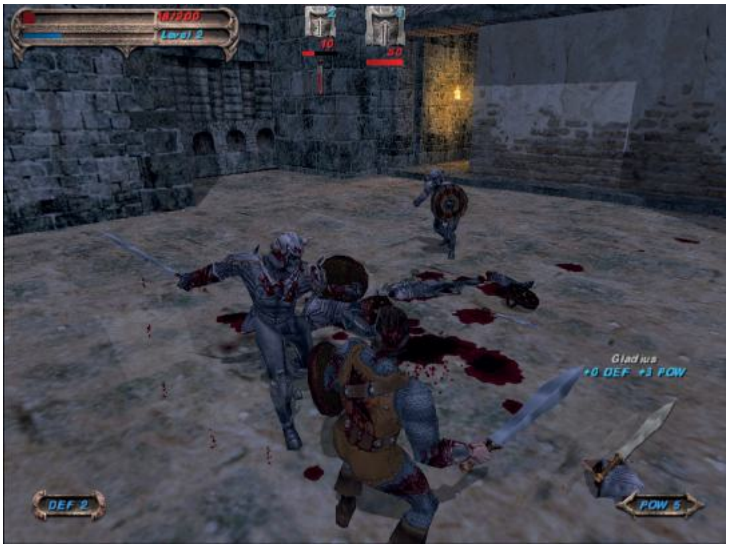
Your character possesses not only a health bar, but also a power bar that depletes after each attack, à la *Dark Souls*. The more powerful a weapon or combo is, the more energy it will consume. Coming from a very large bestiary (orcs, demons, tainted knights), enemies are restless and won't go down easily. To make things worse, they use the same tactical array as you: blocking, poisoned weapons and deadly combos.

Don't be fooled by the hack-and-slash nature of the game; cautiousness and a tactical approach are the only ways to progress through the game. Tackling more than two enemies, even weak ones, at the same time is always a perilous task. Fortunately, you get a few edges to fight the relentless hordes thrown at you. Weapons start pretty weak but new ones can be picked up along the way. Every class of weapon offers different combos, so it's always a good idea to keep a spare mace to crush skeletons, for example. Few ranged weapons are present, but only the Amazon will find them useful, puzzles notwithstanding.

Severance employs a lock-on system, like that of *Ocarina of Time*. You can dodge and block attacks, but range and durability are always an issue, so be careful. A few types of armour are hidden through the levels, making your character a bit harder to kill. A small inventory allows you to stock a handful of health and power-up potions for the most difficult passages. The RPG aspect is limited to a levelling-up system automatically boosting your life and power, and unlocking new combos. Levelling up also refills your life bar: a godsend in the middle of a tense fight.

Blade of Darkness is divided into a dozen levels, with the first level specific to each character. The level design is so-so, with some being pretty labyrinthine while others are just a succession of arenas. Fortunately, the general aesthetic is much better.

> “I didn’t want a combat system that required button-mashing to defeat enemies; I wanted a system that could turn every fight into a test, where any enemy could be a challenge, where you couldn’t advance without being cautious. I wanted feeling, not a simulation; something that could transmit a kind of adrenaline surge when you see an enemy approaching.”
>
> *– José Luis Vaello,*
> Severance*’s lead artist*



The combat will feel familiar to *Dark Souls* fans, but *Severance* adds combos, breakable shields, weapon throwing, mutilations and blood galore

The game will send you to very different and exotic places, such as Arabic oases, abandoned fortresses and deep wilderness. Doors, gates and various mechanisms will always bar your way, so you will spend most of the game looking for keys. Traps of all sorts are present at every corner and levels are extremely long, so saving often is always a good idea.

Once the titular Blade of Darkness is acquired, you can either choose to proceed to the final boss’s lair or backtrack to previous levels. Indeed the magic weapon is weakened and its power needs to be unlocked by using eight runes, hidden across the entire game. It’s better to keep a lookout for those early on because revisited levels are filled with high-end monsters. Collecting those runes will unlock an additional level and the true final boss. He is pretty tough, but at this point you should have seen worse.

Beyond its tough-as-nails difficulty, *Severance*’s novelty at the time came from its use of lighting. Completely coded in Python, the game engine displays beautiful shadows and makes a clever use of light sources. Some levels, like the Knight’s starting level, offer a dreary, gothic atmosphere fed by torches and eerie sound design. Fire can also be used to set wooden structures alight, and solve a few puzzles, which is a pretty cool feature.

The funniest thing about *Severance,* and one of its most marketed features, is the omnipresent gore. After a few exchanges, your character and the enemy alike will be covered with wounds and the ground repainted with litres of blood. Characters can be brutally dismembered, and you can then use the body parts lying around as weapons. It’s pretty satisfying and completely ridiculous at the same time.

Mixing classic deathtrap games like *Dungeon Master* with hack-and-slash mechanics, *Severance* has been reconsidered these last years, in light of the *Demons/Dark Souls* series. While I doubt there was any influence from either, the parallel is interesting and made new players aware of *Severance*’s existence. Harsh but fun, as it definitively should be. **TR**

Mods:

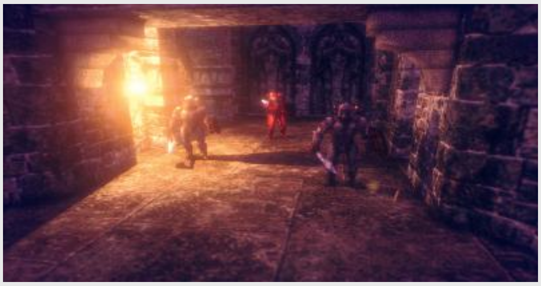
Severance has a great community, which has created various mods with new combos, levels, features and even new game modes. Here are some highlights:

BOD Loader: This exceptional mod manager makes installing and playing mods a cakewalk.

Gladiator: A survival mode in which you must fight increasingly powerful enemies. Highly customisable and replayable, with various maps. A must-play.

Fugitive: An excellent multi-chapter campaign, has amazing level design and adds new RPG elements.

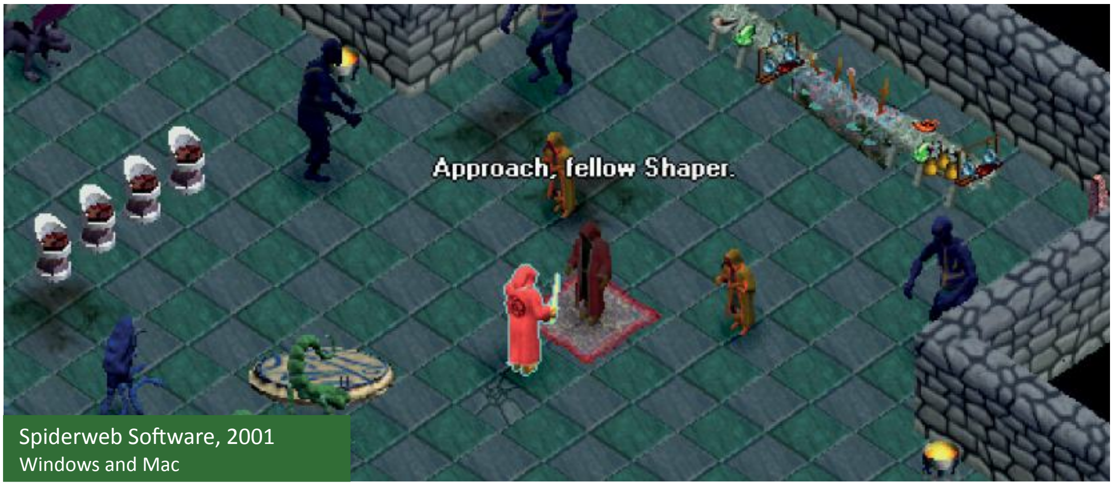
Dwarf Wars: You must protect a large fortress against hordes of enemies, in an endless massive battle.



The *Blade of Light* mod uses ENB to add some heavy post-processing. Pretty, but not for everyone.

If you have an interest in mods, be sure to check out *Arokh’s Lair*, where *Severance* modders and fans still gather.

Geneforge

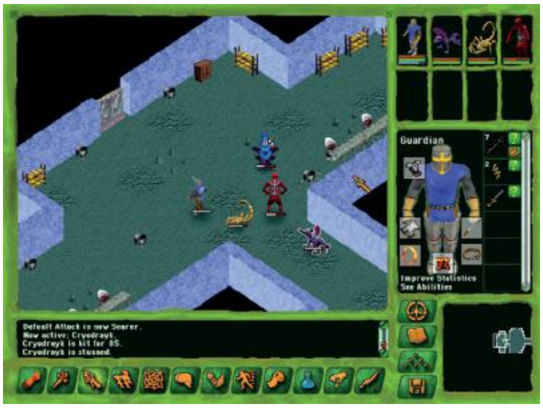

Approach, fellow Shaper.

Spiderweb Software, 2001
Windows and Mac

Geneforge, to me, is what an RPG game should be about. A nameless protagonist walks into the world, and chooses their destiny. Skills are built, alliances formed, enemies made. You can be the loyal ally, the backstabbing traitor, or simply slaughter everyone before you have a chance to decide. At the end, what you have is a personal experience, something built by the choices you have made.

The first few steps in *Geneforge* did not grab my attention. Being from a small studio, the game is built with budget graphics, and the combat model is relatively simplistic. What first started to pique my interest was the well-crafted backstory.

The main premise of the game is a world in which a ruling clan, the Shapers, uses magical (genetic?) techniques to build servants, and retains tight control over those powers with the premise that abuse would be deadly. This creates, in essence, a ruling class, with complete dominance over its sentient creations. The moral questions raised by this situation continue throughout the series, and to my dissatisfaction, are never resolved in black-and-white fashion.



Default Attack is now Searer.
Now active: Cryodrayk.
Cryodrayk is hit for 85.
Cryodrayk is stunned.

Combat is turn-based and somewhat simplistic, but the enemy AI can often surprise you

The combat, while simple, can play out very differently based on character build and skill choices. You can focus on combat skills, magic skills or shaping skills. Shaping skills tend to be my favourite, as eventually your character ends up with a group of creatures that gain strength as they survive combat.

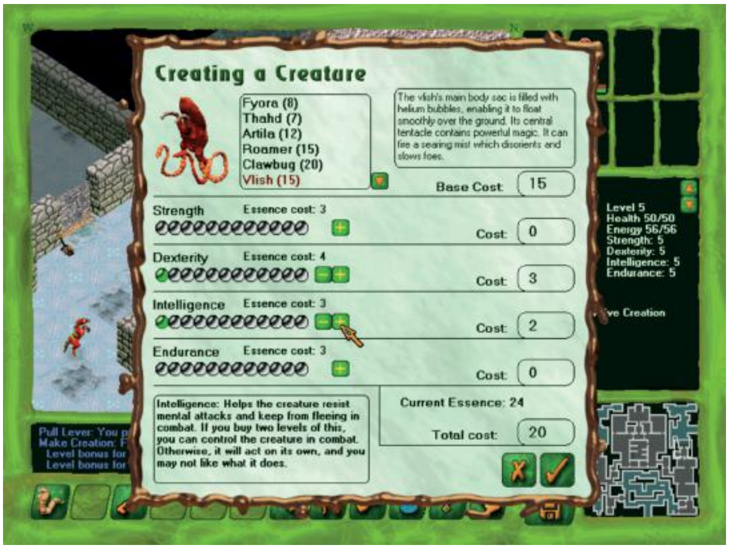
Do you sacrifice the little guy, who has travelled with you from the beginning, in order to create the newest monster you discovered? Do you even care? While battles can get repetitive, there's a nice feeling of progression, which I feel an RPG needs. As the games progresses, the battles will play out differently depending on your character build.

Shaping is what differentiates *Geneforge* from a typical fantasy setting; you are creating and toying with life, and, as the series progresses, the story reveals a more technological approach to creating creatures. The "art" of shaping often blurs the line between sci-fi and fantasy. Shaping could be easily dismissed as another word for summoning, but regardless of the terminology, *Geneforge* allows for more control of "shaped" creatures than other games do.

Shaped creatures consume a certain amount of energy from your character, and an experienced creature can be a valuable companion. The balance between the energy used for maintaining old creatures, creating new ones, and maintaining a reserve for spell-casting can be more strategic than the actual battles.

This all sets the stage for a beautifully open-ended style of game. Your character, arriving on an abandoned island, meets different populations of humans and Shaper creations that have radically different views on the world of the Shapers. The world is yours to explore, at times limited by game events or necessary items, but mostly defined by the prowess of your character and the allies you have made.

> “The basic idea was that I wanted a game where you could make this horde of creatures to serve you, and care for them or let them get slaughtered according to your whim. I had to think of what sort of people could gain this power, and how they would treat it. And then I thought about how they would interact with the world around them, and, more importantly, how they would interact with the creatures they make. And that’s where the plot came from.”
>
> *– Jeff Vogel,*
> *Founder of Spiderweb Software*



Creating a Creature

Fyora (8)
Thahd (7)
Artila (12)
Roamer (15)
Clawbug (20)
Vlish (15)

The vlish's main body sac is filled with helium bubbles, enabling it to float smoothly over the ground. Its central tentacle contains powerful magic. It can fire a searing mist which disorients and slows foes.

Base Cost: 15

Strength — Essence cost: 3 — Cost: 0
Dexterity — Essence cost: 4 — Cost: 3
Intelligence — Essence cost: 3 — Cost: 2
Endurance — Essence cost: 3 — Cost: 0

Intelligence: Helps the creature resist mental attacks and keep from fleeing in combat. If you buy two levels of this, you can control the creature in combat. Otherwise, it will act on its own, and you may not like what it does.

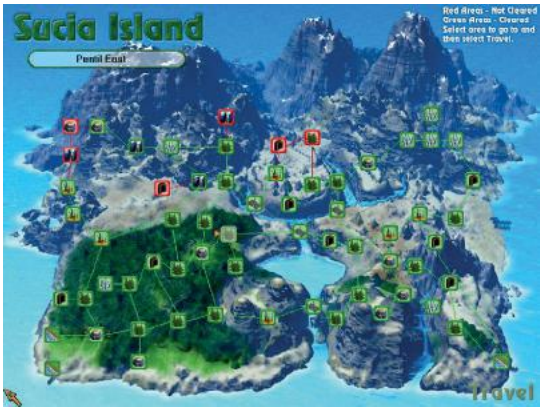
Current Essence: 24
Total cost: 20

You can use Shaper magic to create creatures, in whatever fashion fits your playstyle best

The *Graphics Enhancement* mod replaces *Geneforge*’s amateurish UI, fixes graphical inconsistencies and updates some of its sprites.

This, in my opinion, is where the game truly shines. Your choices, both in character build and NPC interaction, have tangible consequences in the game world. What is one player’s hometown is another’s enemy fortress. Do you go after power at all costs, or do you try to do what you think is right? All options are available, and power is yours for the taking if you are strong or cunning enough. The sense of power, as I mentioned earlier, is satisfying as your entourage of creatures grows, your magic gets more powerful, and your combat skills improve.

The choices continue to lead up to the ending of the game. There are several endings possible, and not just of the “last-minute good or evil” type. Your choices throughout the game lead up to a set of ending slides, which describe the impact of your choices. Again, the game does not disappoint: “good” choices do not always lead to the outcome that you might expect.



Sucia Island is massive, and exploration is node-based; you’ll have to search carefully to find hidden areas

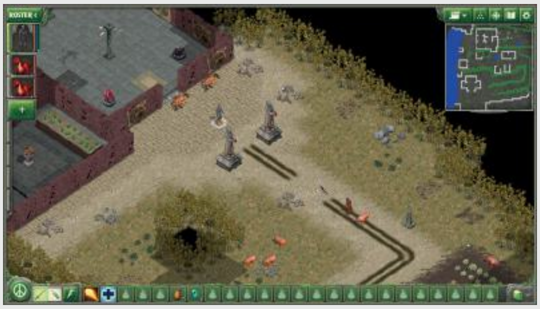
For me, the first game was just the starting point for a wonderful series. What creator Jeff Vogel has done is to create a coherent story of the Shapers that spans all five games. There are highs and lows along the way, but taken in total they provided me with a wonderful experience, and a fantastic story of a strange world.

Throughout the series, the choices continued to provoke my thoughts about the morality involved in the control of power, and whether “good” ends – containing deadly power or ending unjust slavery – justify whatever means are necessary. By the end of the five-game series, I had become attached to the world of the Shapers, and was sad to see the journey end.

The *Geneforge* games, like both *Fallout* and *Arcanum*, impress me as games in which the player not only explores the world, but also shapes it. **BL**

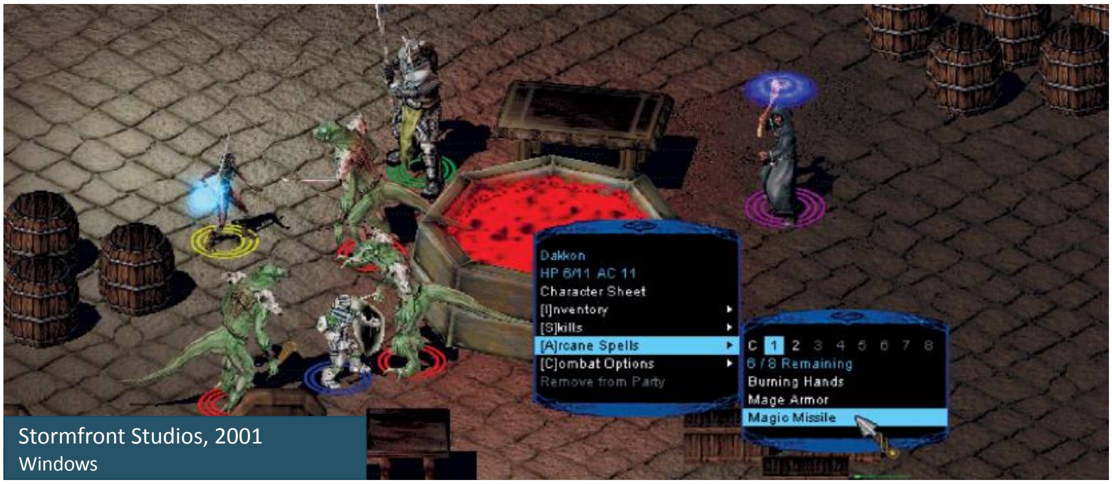
Remake:

In 2020 Spiderweb kickstarted *Geneforge 1 - Mutagen,* a remaster of the first game. It raised $85,141, and the game was released in 2021, for Windows, Mac and iPads.



The remaster adds new content and streamlines some systems, but still has no music and the UI lacks quality-of-life features

Pool of Radiance:
Ruins of Myth Drannor

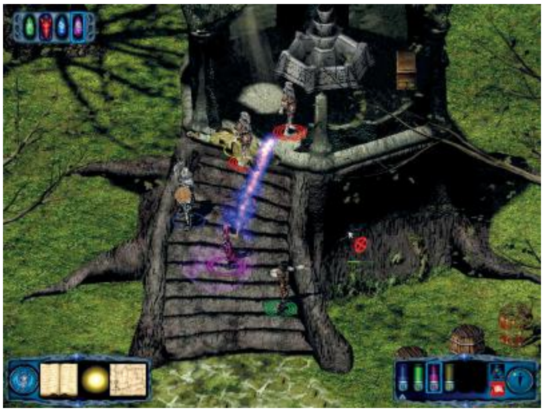


Stormfront Studios, 2001
Windows

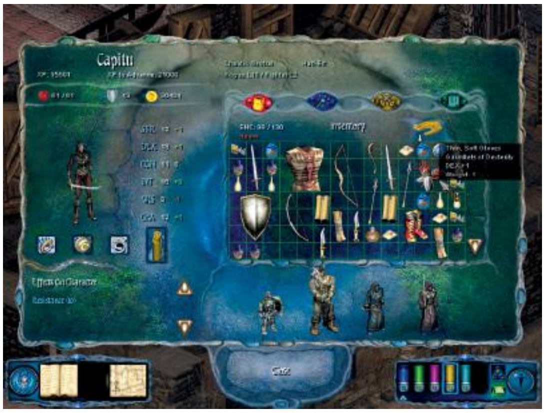
If you're willing to try the game, be sure to patch it to version 1.4 and install the Speed Control Utility.

Search for the worst CRPG ever made and you'll likely find *Ruins of Myth Drannor.* As Ubisoft's attempt to ride on the success of *Baldur's Gate*, this infamous game promised to take the Infinity Engine formula forward by employing 3D graphics and the recently released *D&D* 3rd Edition ruleset.

Plus, it was developed by a team of Gold Box veterans – titled and advertised as a fully turn-based successor to the beloved classic *Pool of Radiance*!



Combat includes features such as attacks of opportunity, feats and even morale checks, but the slow speed and bad UI take most of the fun out of it



Even looting is a dull process, as items all look the same and rarely offer anything besides a small armour, stat or damage increase

Sadly, excitement became disappointment when the game was released. You start by creating a party of four characters (two extra NPCs can later be added), but the *D&D* 3rd Edition rules are heavily defaced: you can't play as a Gnome; the Bard, Druid and Wizard classes are missing; and the few skills and feats available are all automatically chosen based on your class.

Set in the ruins of the long-lost elven city of Myth Drannor, the game doesn't have many role-playing options. It's a combat-focused dungeon crawl, with some of the largest dungeon floors you'll see. But while there are some nice outdoor areas later on, the game first forces you to explore extremely dull underground mazes, filled with hordes of the same few monsters.

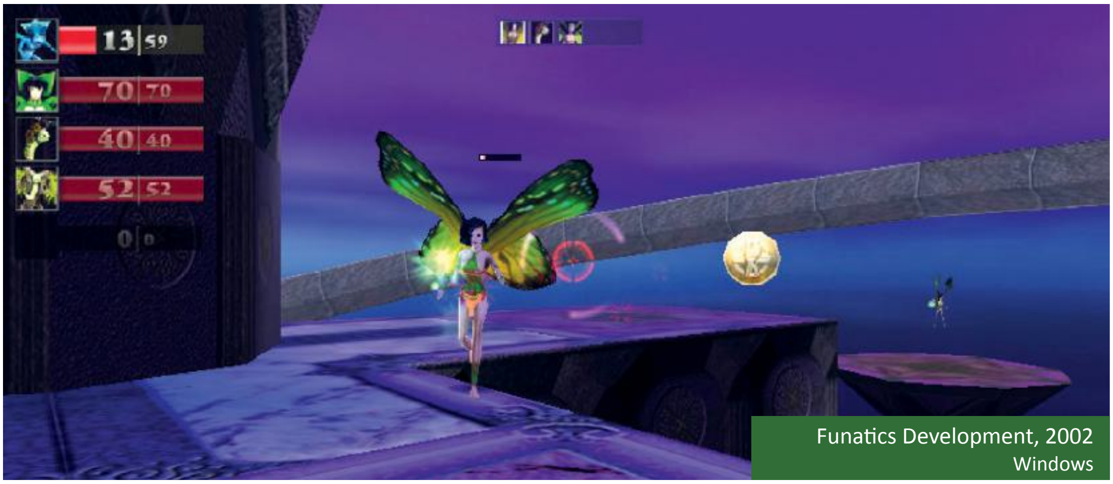
Combat is a decent translation of *D&D*, crippled by a horrible interface. You can neither see nor control the character's path; the AI is unstable; and there's a short time limit on each character's turn – a useful feature in multiplayer, but a sin in single-player mode.

To make matters worse, the game plays glacially slowly. It takes forever to walk, cast or attack (an undead group can take multiple minutes per turn) and you'll spend hours slowly backtracking through gigantic mazes with unreliable maps and even worse path-finding.

Luckily, fans managed to create a handy mod to increase the game's speed. With it, *Ruins of Myth Drannor* becomes an actually playable experience, and those desperate for a turn-based *D&D* dungeon crawl might even find some enjoyment here – if they can endure the sheer boredom of the initial dungeon.

Objectively, there are definitely worse CRPGs, but few can rival the disappointment this one induced. And it certainly did not help that *RoMD* also came with a wide range of bugs, including a legendary one: uninstalling the unpatched game could erase some of your system files, forcing you to reinstall Windows. **FE**

ZanZarah:
The Hidden Portal



Funatics Development, 2002
Windows

Have you ever imagined a cross between *Quake* and *Pokémon?* I bet not. And you have probably also never heard of *ZanZarah*, an obscure German game about a teenage girl visiting a land of fairies. What do these things have in common? Well, everything.

In *ZanZarah* you play as Amy, who goes from London to a magical land of fairies, elves and wonder. This enchanted world is threatened by an ancient evil; your arrival was foretold by a prophecy, and all that. Your quest here is to explore the land, help the locals and gather a party of magical creatures to save the world. To recruit these creatures you must first weaken one in combat and then throw a special ball to capture it. That sounds very familiar, no?

And it doesn't stop there. *ZanZarah* offers over 70 magical creatures – including animals, dragons and demons – across 12 types: Fire, Water, Nature, Air, Stone, Ice, Chaos, Energy, Psi, Metal, Dark and Light. Their attacks have the classic effective/non-effective relationships, and in true *Pokémon* fashion you also get to choose your initial fairy from three types. They even evolve after reaching a certain level.

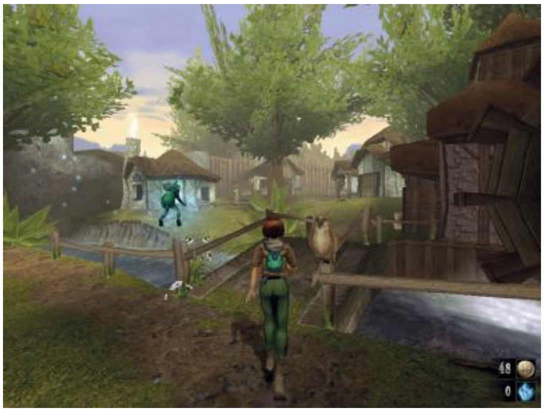
But here's the big twist: unlike in *Pokémon*, you won't battle in turn-based combat, but rather in FPS arenas with elaborate layouts, firing magic blasts at enemies while strafing, dodging and flying!

There are no guns, but each fairy can equip up to four different spells – two offensive and two passive. The game features 120 spells with a wide range of effects, damage, fire rate and mana pools. Spells must be charged before firing – some allow for quick bursts, others are very slow – but charge too much and it will backfire. All of this keeps battles interesting, as you'll have to figure out the best loadout to use depending on the arena layout or the enemy type you face.

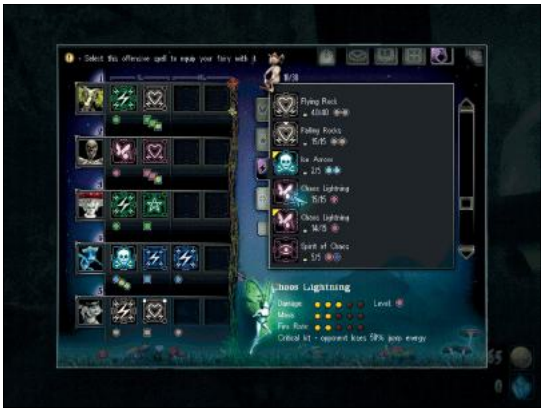
To crown everything, the soundtrack is great. Composed by King Einstein, the combat music is exciting, the exploration music is charming and the main theme is a nice melody sung by Karina Gretere.

ZanZarah is a very obscure game, somewhat hard to run on modern computers, and its mix of FPS arena combat and fairies is so odd that it's hard to say what audience it's aimed at. Regardless, whoever decides to give it a try is likely to find something to enjoy. **FE**

***ZanZarah*'s soundtrack is freely available for download at the game's website www.zanzarah.de.**

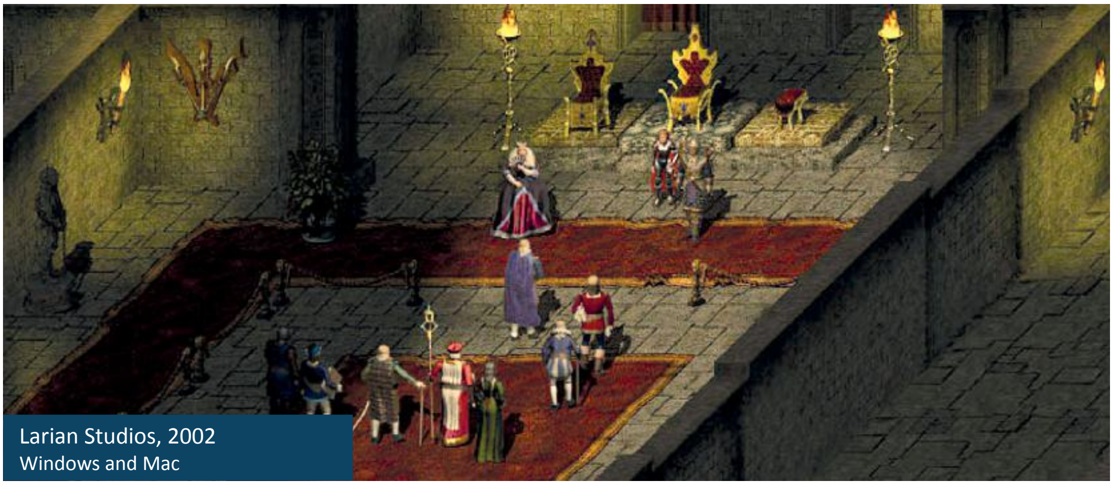


Wild fairies can suddenly appear while you explore the colourful world, and locals may give quests or challenge you to duels



Your party can hold up to five fairies, and each can have four spells equipped, with varying requirements and affinities; some fairies can also equip spells from multiple elements

Divine Divinity



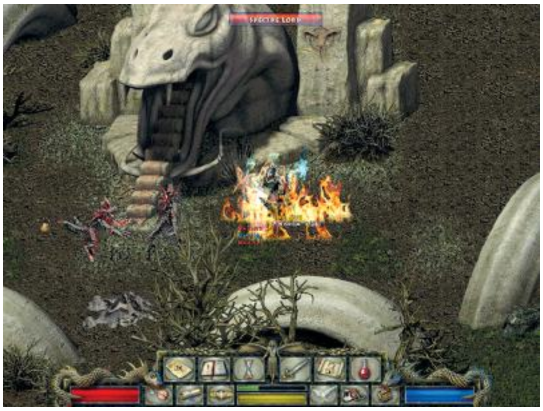
Larian Studios, 2002
Windows and Mac

Larian's first RPG was called *The Lady, the Mage & the Knight*, developed in partnership with Attic Entertainment. It was cancelled in 1999 and salvaged as *Divine Divinity*. An early demo and design documents were released as extras on the *Divinity Anthology*.

Larian Studios' *Divine Divinity* has attracted an undeserved reputation since its release. The problem is that it was released in 2002, a time when various *Diablo* clones were popping up left and right. Furthermore, if you looked at various screens or played it for half an hour or so, it really did seem to be just another *Diablo* clone, so the moniker's stuck even today. Even though *Divine Divinity* is so much more than that.

Sure, there are many elements of a generic hack-and-slash here. The UI, the randomised tons of phat loot, hordes of monsters and similar core mechanics are all things we've seen countless times already.

However, these are only superficial, and *Divine Divinity*'s unique aspects only become apparent once you spend a few hours finding them. The easiest one to notice is the character system, which is much more RPG-y than in your average hack-and-slash. Not only is it ultimately classless, since all characters can learn all skills as they see fit, but it also has quite a few non-combat qualities, such as pickpocketing, sneaking, haggling and alchemy.



Combat is very similar to *Diablo*'s, but you can pause at any time

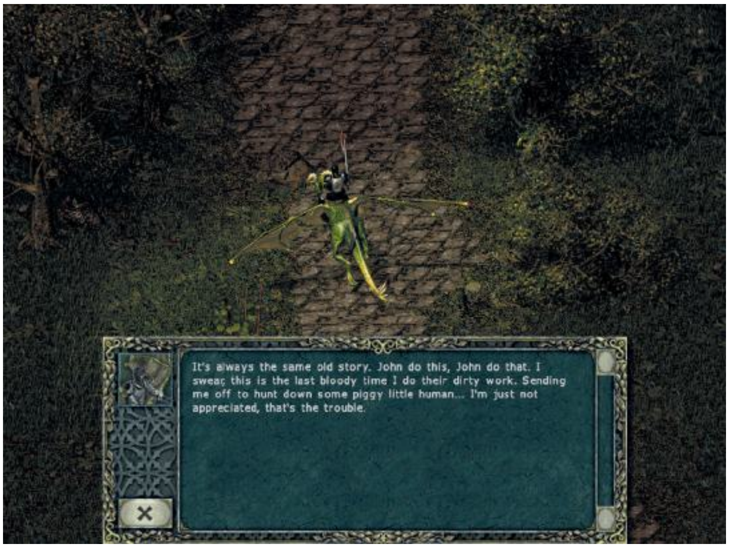
The game also tracks your reputation (influenced by various events), which changes merchants' prices and people's personal opinions of you, which may in turn lock or unlock new quests.

But the most important difference, that makes *Divine Divinity* an actual RPG and not just a slasher, is the lack of procedural generation. All quests, maps, events and conversations are hand-placed; the only random element is loot. This is especially great when it comes to exploration, because the land map is simply huge, while the dungeons and caves provide you with plenty of puzzles and secrets. Puzzles and secrets that employ *Divine Divinity*'s most unique feature – its *Ultima VII*-inspired environmental interaction.

Literally every prop can be tossed around to reveal hidden chests and passages underneath, and various items can be activated to secret effects, which rewards thoroughness and perceptiveness. Sometimes this juggling can lead to rather interesting discoveries, often bordering on bug-exploitation, such as finding a bed that can be put in your backpack because it weighs nothing. But running aimlessly around the map simply looking for opportunities is also rewarding for more technical reasons – *Divine Divinity*'s graphics are really pleasant to look at, and its soundtrack is simply amazing.

It is also important to note that *Divine Divinity* very often focuses elsewhere than on combat, and some chapters will not require you to draw your weapon for quite long periods of time. Instead, you'll be running around towns just talking to folks, doing various quests, robbing them blind and chasing secrets, and there are a variety of settlements in the game, all with different themes and problems to solve. These "pacifist" chapters are made even better by Larian's now-trademark witty writing.

> “The RPGs I enjoy the most are all about good character development. To achieve that, I figured certain things need to be in place – the freedom to develop your character in a way that fits your preferred playing style (Freedom), motivation to invest yourself in that character (Motivation) and an environment that reacts in a fitting way to how you developed your character (Universe/Enemies).”
>
> – *Swen Vincke, Larian’s founder and CEO*



It's always the same old story. John do this, John do that. I swear, this is the last bloody time I do their dirty work. Sending me off to hunt down some piggy little human... I'm just not appreciated, that's the trouble.

The writing is always amusing, and has grown to become one of Larian’s trademarks

Everything is not just generally well-written; the dialogues are often genuinely funny, employing various tongue-in-cheek methods, poking fun at the fantasy genre in general, and sometimes even going into self-parody. This also makes all the otherwise generic fetch quests much more interesting and fun to do because you can always expect some sort of a little twist to the tired old formula.

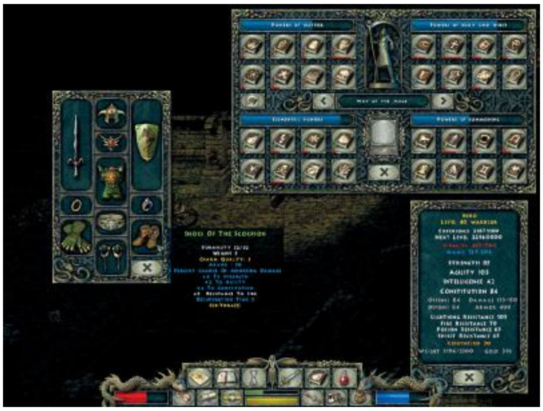
Unfortunately, it would simply be unfair to not mention *Divine Divinity’s* biggest flaw, which is the endgame. Apparently, the game was much bigger and more ambitious than the developer and the publisher could chew, which resulted in the final chapter being terribly rushed. Most of the qualities that make *Divinity* unique simply disappear in the last chapter, leaving you with fully railroaded, non-stop mindless fighting against annoying, health-bloated mobs of enemies. Although at least you can just go ahead and run all the way through, ignoring all opposition completely.

Ultimately, if you really dislike hack-and-slash combat, *Divinity* might not be up your alley. I did like, however, the way it can even get pretty challenging at times, and how the game’s systems leave you a lot of room for personal customisation and ways to shamelessly break them to your advantage.

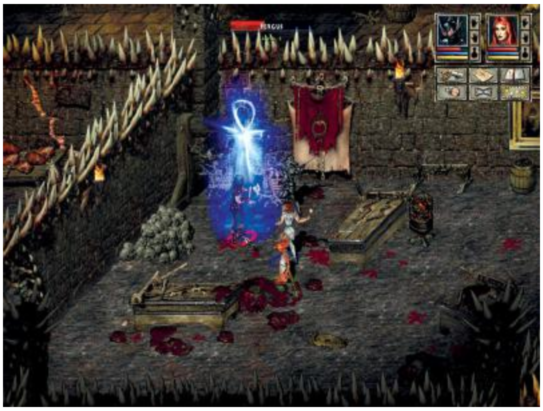
What is left to conclude, then? *Divine Divinity* is simply a neat game. Not flawless by any means, but ridiculously absorbing and long enough to entertain you for weeks. It’s one of those games that make you think, “A combination of fetch quests and generic fighting has no right to be this damn addictive!”

It’s also the start of the whole *Divinity* series. *Beyond Divinity* (2004) was a mediocre sequel, but the next titles are definitely worth more than a casual look (especially *Divinity 2* and *Divinity: Original Sin*). Because casual looks are deceiving and make you think *Divine Divinity* is a *Diablo* clone. Which it isn’t. Get that into your head once and for all. **DR**

All the music in the *Divinity* series was composed by Kirill Pokrovsky, the late Russian musician, whose mix of orchestrations and new age electronics made the soundtracks an intrinsic part of the franchise.



You select a class initially, but you can learn any skill and use any equipment if you meet the requirements



Beyond Divinity had your hero soul-bound to a sarcastic Death Knight, with you both having to cooperate to survive

The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind

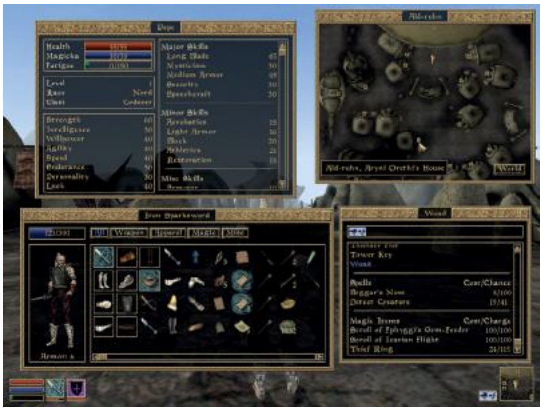
Bethesda Softworks, 2002
Windows and Xbox*

*OpenMW is a fan project that recreates *Morrowind* in a new open engine, allowing for several improvements and Linux and Mac versions. You can follow them at www.openmw.org.

My first trip to Vivec City was an unforgettable hour of confusion and awe. *The Elder Scrolls*' extraordinary attention to detail, both large and small, reaches an apex there.

Vivec is like a cramped cyberpunk cityscape, but it's presented inside the brown sandstone of medieval fantasy. Eight floating stone pyramids comprise the city's eight districts, with a network of gondolas and bridges connecting them to each other and the mainland. Each district has four explorable interior levels each, containing innumerable businesses and residences that house hundreds of named NPCs.

They all have their own inventories, their own dispositions, jobs, haunts and hangouts that combine to give each NPC their own personal little story. The fictional economy that supports these fictional lives is on full display – their houses, their businesses, the farms that grow their food and the sewers that funnel away their waste are not spared any detail. Administrative businesses, libraries, treasuries and offices take up space next to the rowdy taverns and ghastly magic shops.



The interface is the last in the series to be made with PCs in mind, making great use of tooltips and multiple resizeable windows

Vvardenfell, the massive island you explore in *Morrowind*, is one of the few sandbox maps that feels like it was built without any intention to turn it into a game, as if it was designed and mapped to serve the lore more than playability. As far as the player's lofty quests are concerned, all those administrative details behind Vivec City's economy aren't relevant.

You can learn all about the process of how the nearby Netch farms churn out Netch leather which turns into Netch armour, and it's only flavour text. There are almost two hundred different books to read (well, not really books so much, as they are just a few paragraphs each, but still) that document everything from the world's history to directories of the council members that currently lead its political parties.

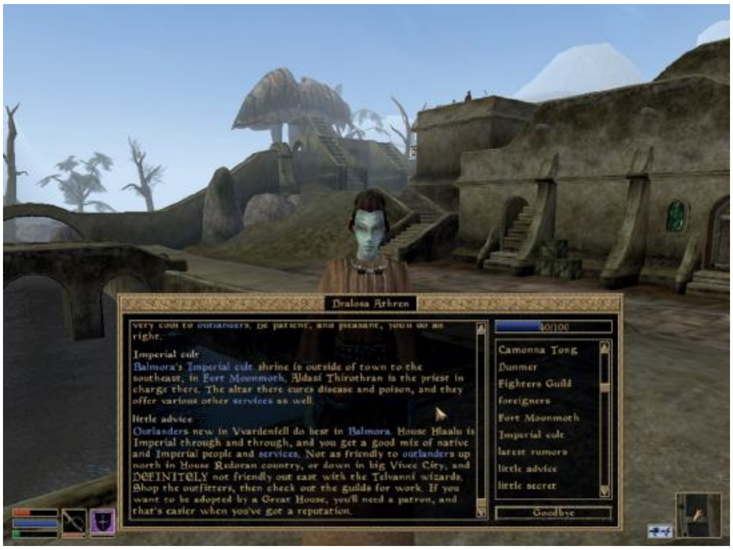
All this detail doesn't really make or break the game, mechanically speaking. It's just there. It's flavour text the player can skip. But what this massive amount of detail does do well (and indeed, its very purpose in the game) is to reify Vvardenfell as a world that is almost as complicated, ancient and dynamic as our own.

Look at how the game handles transportation, for example. Instead of pointing and clicking on a map screen to fast-travel (as in the *TES* games before and after *Morrowind*) you use Vvardenfell's public transport system instead. The people of this island use animal mounts, ferry boats and magic teleporter booths to travel around. So, during the early game, you use those facilities too.

Critics, during the game's launch, rightfully bemoaned *Morrowind*'s slow walking speed and constricting fast-travel system, but those caveats serve as build-up for a divine pay-off later on. They build anticipation for a revelatory moment that the player may not experience for tens or perhaps hundreds of hours later. Until then, *Morrowind* is a slow-burning game.

"I often liken *Morrowind* to *Moby Dick*, while *Oblivion* is *Titanic*, the movie. *Morrowind* was a vast, overly ambitious project, but glorious in many ways – but tragically inaccessible as a result. It had a much smaller audience because it was odder and less generic and less what people expect. With *Oblivion*, we knew what people expected and deliberately made our product a lot more comfortable for them."

– *Ken Rolston,*
Morrowind*'s lead designer*



very cool to outlanders, be patient, and pleasant, you'll do all right.

Imperial cult
Balmora's Imperial cult shrine is outside of town to the southeast, in Fort Moonmoth. Aldasi Thirothran is the priest in charge there. The altar there cures disease and poison, and they offer various other services as well.

little advice
Outlanders new in Vvardenfell do best in Balmora. House Hlaalu is Imperial through and through, and you get a good mix of native and Imperial people and services. Not as friendly to outlanders up north in House Redoran country, or down in big Vivec City, and DEFINITELY not friendly out east with the Telvanni wizards. Shop the outfitters, then check out the guilds for work. If you want to be adopted by a Great House, you'll need a patron, and that's easier when you've got a reputation.

Morrowind's dialogue is very complex, being affected by both faction and personal reputation, and features a robust keyword system

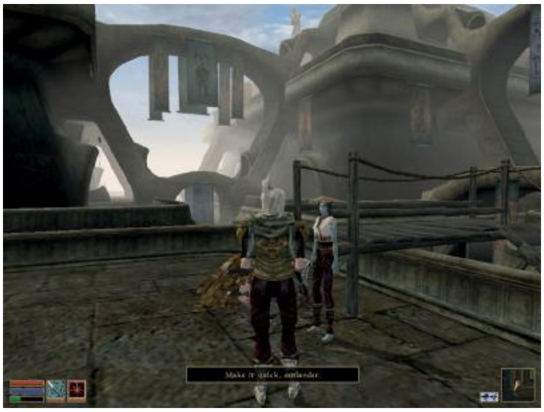
Transportation starts off slow. Combat starts off incredibly awkwardly. Since the world seems like it was designed before the gameplay was considered, it doesn't lead you through roads and villages that are cleanly organised to funnel you in the right direction. The names are hard to pronounce, there are no omnipotent objectives prodding you this way or that way, and wherever you end up there will be just way too much stuff there.

What gives you guidance is your own sense of adventure and a brilliantly self-aware main quest that tasks you with becoming the omnipotent God-king of Vvardenfell. Eventually, some overpowering stat progression happens after Level 10 that makes combat and walking much faster, and during that time your understanding of Vvardenfell will also increase immensely. You'll come to learn the hard-to-pronounce names of its numerous towns and locations. You'll get to know its tribes, its council members, its politics and its religions, because the main quest tasks you with meeting and manipulating every last one of them.

Soon you'll be able to teleport across the map, fly from city to city, and sprint with blinding speed! You'll forget about the public transport system because, just as all the flavour text of the main quest suggested you'd do, you'll become a godlike warrior-poet who knows this island inside and out, whether you were trying to pay attention or not.

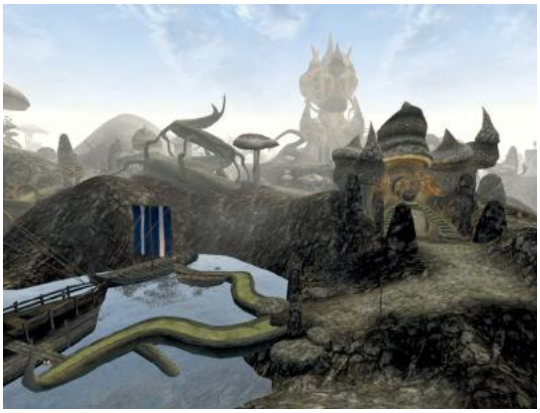
The most brilliant twist *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind* takes is that you'll actually have a mental frame of reference so you know how great your progression feels. It's not about increasing numbers on a stat sheet. It's about thoroughly understanding a large, intimidating and alien world that is almost as complicated as our own. **GW**

Bethesda released *The Elder Scrolls Construction Set* with *Morrowind*, starting the tradition of their games having a strong modding scene.



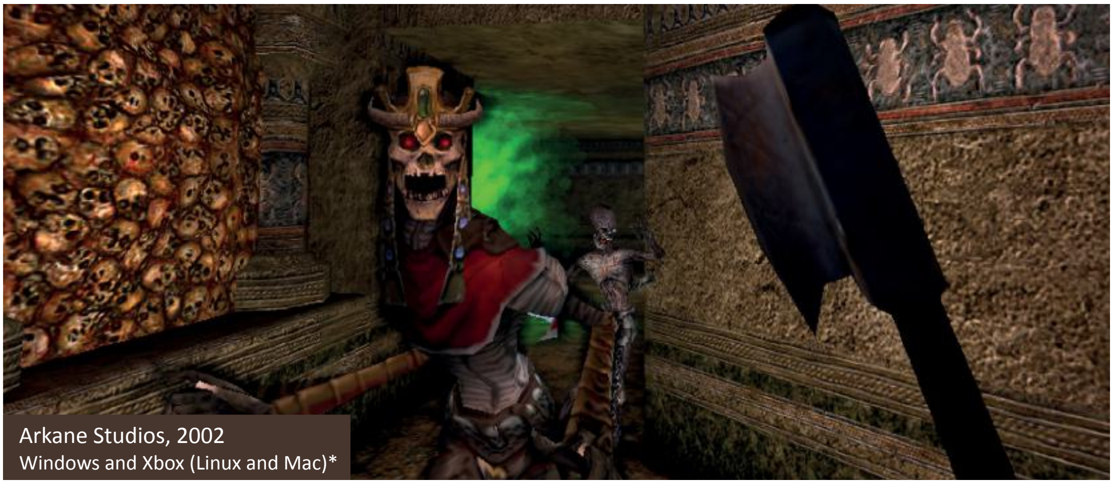
Make it quick, outlander.

Morrowind adds the option to switch to a third-person camera, although the animations are quite simple



The landscape of Vvardenfell is exotic and fascinating, going far beyond traditional fantasy clichés

Arx Fatalis



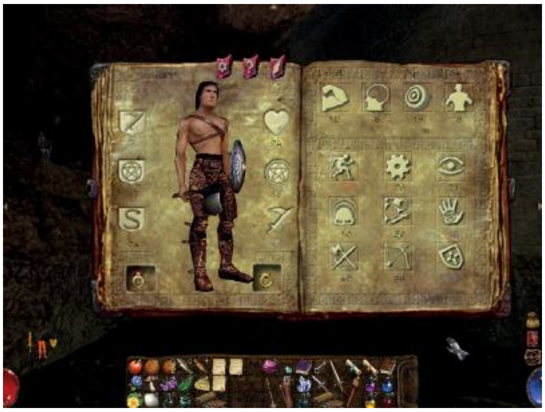
Arkane Studios, 2002
Windows and Xbox (Linux and Mac)*

*In 2011 Arkane Studios released the source code of *Arx Fatalis* as free software. From it was created *Arx Libertatis*, a cross-platform, open-source port of the game, with various bug fixes.

Originally pitched as *Ultima Underworld 3* by one Raphael Colantonio and rejected by EA, *Arx Fatalis* was the result of Colantonio founding Arkane Studios to bring his pitch to life.

Much like its inspiration, the game takes place entirely underground in an eight-level dungeon involving both traditional dungeon-crawling and social interactions in populated locations. The reason for this particular setup is that an ice age has forced the survivors on this fantasy world to take shelter in underground enclaves that hold what is left of civilisation. Arx, a converted mine with many politically divided species crammed in together, is one such place, and the centre of the game's narrative.

The early levels of *Arx Fatalis* emphasise politics and investigative quests, such as dealing with goblins and their troll workers, while later levels offer adventurous dungeon-delving, such as a huge crypt that manages to deliver a surprisingly tense atmosphere. There's even a level in which the game takes a trip into survival horror territory.



The character system is simple, employing four stats and nine skills; there isn't much equipment variety, but you can enchant your weapons

The quest design is sparse, with only a handful of contextual side jobs, but there are many unspecified goals, like robbing a bank or following cryptic scavenger hunts – player agency and exploration are emphasised instead of direct instructions.

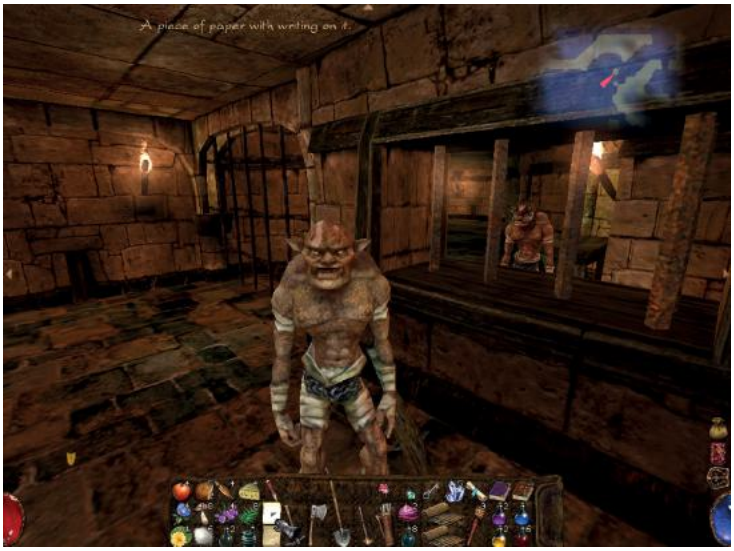
All of this results in unpredictable pacing, which means that, while the game is short for an RPG, clocking in at about 20 hours, there is a great deal of variation. This is reflected in the progress system as well, only three of the nine skills that define the player's avatar being decidedly combat-focused. Since these can be increased without any restriction, versatility is heavily encouraged.

Balance leaves a lot to be desired though; the Ethereal Link shows enemy stats and boosts your magical power regeneration, but, with simple combat and a high available potion count, it can be safely ignored. In dire contrast, the indispensable Object Knowledge is the only way to create, enchant, repair and even identify items, which cannot be used otherwise.

While *Arx Fatalis* isn't overly combat focused, the moments in which it does feature fighting for extensive periods of time are certainly among its weaker parts. Melee and ranged combat are decidedly mediocre but stealth is surprisingly well-done; it uses a shadow-based detection gradient – a clear nod to *Thief* by Looking Glass, the same studio that made *Ultima Underworld*. Sadly, the game in no way supports a pure stealth approach. Still, skulking through the shadows can be a pretty tense experience, especially during early levels.

Now onto one of the game's best aspects: the magic system. Each spell is cast by using specific runes, which need to be manually drawn using the mouse, as in Peter Molyneux's *Black & White*. The effects that can be achieved are numerous and frankly outstanding, considering this is a studio's first game.

> “Extreme honour is definitely what we feel whenever *Arx* is mentioned as the successor to the [*Ultima*] *Underworld* series. We’ve always had a lot of admiration for the Looking Glass spirit, so the connection with *Arx* is not an accident at all.”
>
> *– Raphael Colantonio,* Arx Fatalis *project director and Arkane Studios’ CEO*



Arx Fatalis is not your standard, combat-focused dungeon crawler: you’ll spend a lot of time dealing with the various races, solving puzzles and exploring

Levitation, telekinesis, invisibility, fire raising and dousing, confusion, demon summoning, food creation and an invisible eye to scout ahead are just a few of them. In fact, there are so many such effects that the content can’t keep up – the game can be finished using only the fireball spell, and that is a damn shame considering how much work must have gone into making the 40-something spells, especially since many of them are non-combat oriented.

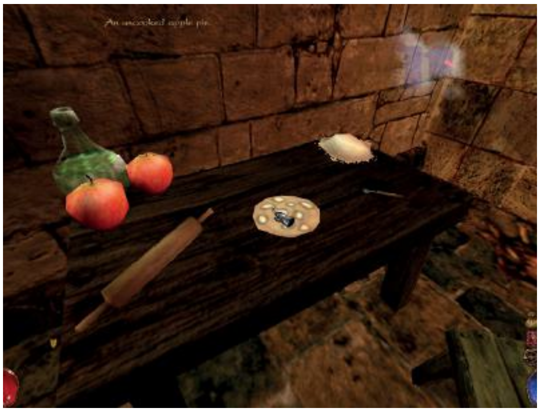
What holds all these elements together is the environmental manipulation that in many ways defines *Arx Fatalis*. You can take flour, add water and then put it near a fire which will cause it to rise, thus making bread. Words cannot describe the child-like sense of wonder this inspired. The interface recalls adventure games, meaning that most interaction is done by directly clicking on the environment, not navigating abstract menus. This does wonders for making the world feel like something that the player must actually engage with.

One particular quest remains memorable to me: you have to go through a multi-step process to make a sword, involving mining the ore, getting it to the smelter and then having to operate all sorts of machinery to get the job done. The important aspect of this type of interaction is not realism, since dough doesn’t turn into bread in five seconds, but a feeling of authenticity. Players understand the world by interacting with it.

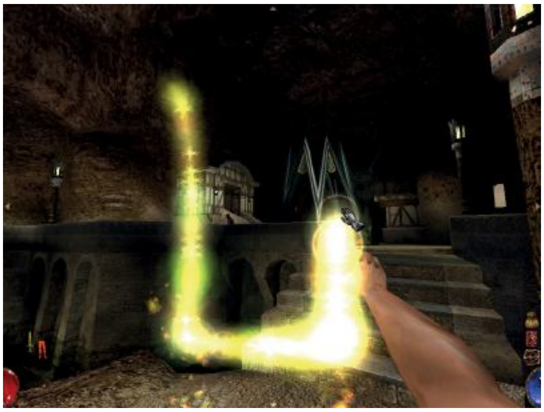
Arx Fatalis is a love letter to Looking Glass and *Ultima Underworld*, with Arkane wearing this influence on its sleeve. The financial risks and challenges of starting a studio from the ground up make Colantonio’s journey to create this game all the more commendable.

It is hard to say what is sadder: that *Arx Fatalis* is one of the last design-focused examples from arguably the best period of PC gaming, or that more that, a decade since its release, it remains unmatched in certain depths. Regardless, it remains a must-play hidden gem. **LL**

If you have already played *Arx*, you might want to replay it with the *Arx Insanity* mod, which adds several visual and gameplay changes, including a new ending.

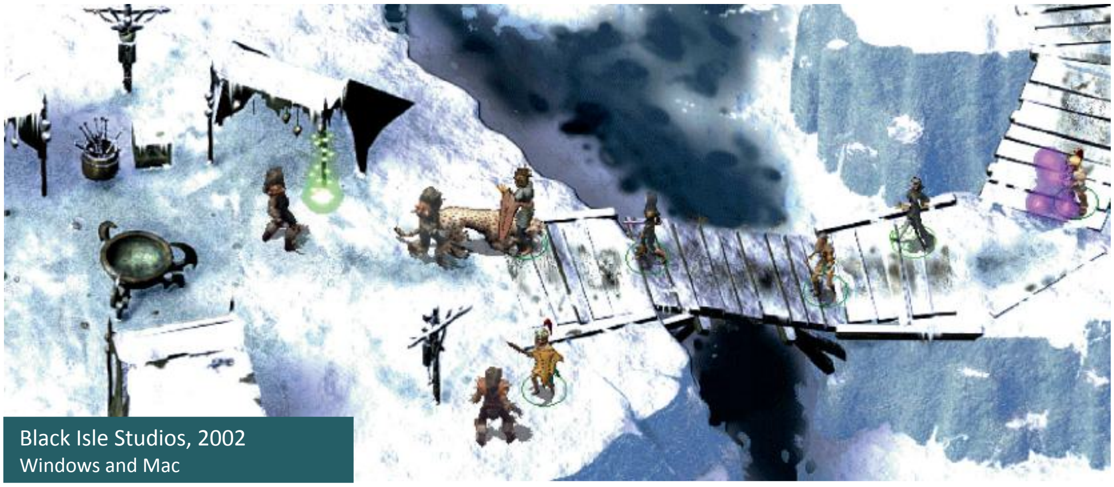


The game employs a simulationist approach, in which you use anvils to repair items, mix ingredients to cook, etc.



Spells are cast by drawing runes with the mouse, but you can memorise some and instantly cast them later

Icewind Dale II

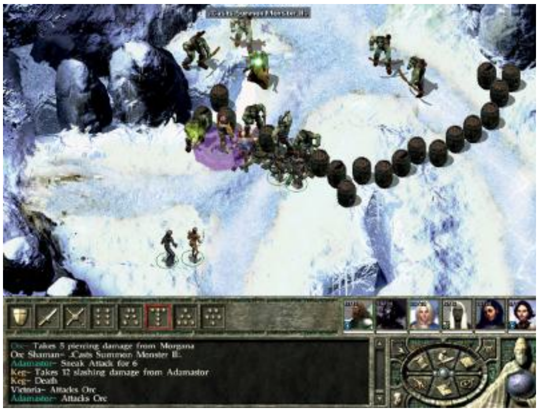


Black Isle Studios, 2002
Windows and Mac

Icewind Dale II was the last of the Infinity Engine games, and one of the last titles published by Interplay, developed during a time when the company was imploding due to poor business choices.

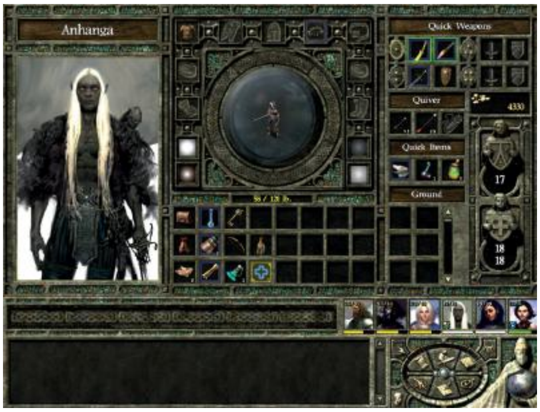
The whole project was allowed just ten months of development time, and, according to lead designer Josh Sawyer, just two days to develop the story and plot. Under these conditions, it's quite a wonder that such a complete product was ever shipped.

There aren't any huge mods for *IWD2*, but Almateria's *IWD2 Fixpack* solves some bugs, and the *Tweak Pack* adds some improvements, such as infinite stacking and extra merchants.



Orc– Takes 5 piercing damage from Morgana
Orc Shaman– :Casts Summon Monster II:
Adamastor– Sneak Attack for 6
Keg– Takes 12 slashing damage from Adamastor
Keg– Death
Victoria– Attacks Orc
Adamastor– Attacks Orc

Enemies make much better use of tactics, building barricades, setting traps and even riding worgs into battle



The 3rd edition *D&D* ruleset adds many changes, including the ability to play as sub-races like the Drow, who are more powerful but have other disadvantages

As the swansong of the Infinity Engine, *IWD2* was (surprisingly) designed not for a new potential audience but for experienced players, featuring a pleasing difficulty level. Most encounters are challenging and well-crafted, making clever use of spells, terrain, abilities and positioning.

As in the previous *Icewind Dale*, you create a party of up to six heroes, but *IWD2* is one of the first games to use the (then new) 3rd edition *Dungeons & Dragons* ruleset, rather than the *AD&D* 2nd Edition rules that had been featured in every other IE game. This includes the addition of a more flexible multi-class system, sub-races, feats and skills – including dialogue skills such as Intimidate and Bluff.

Given the development schedule, this seems more foolish than ambitious, but the change was well implemented and gameplay remains just as smooth and intuitive as in the previous iterations.

The story begins in the harbour of Targos, one of the Ten Towns of Icewind Dale, as your party joins in the defence of the town against a siege by goblins. From there, the adventurers will set out on a quest to defeat the Legion of the Chimera, and restore peace to the Dale, finding that the shadows of the past rest uneasily in these harsh lands.

The detailed artwork of the game is brought to life and enhanced by an evocative Inon Zur soundtrack, which at points matches Jeremy Soules' masterful work on the original; the atmosphere of the game sometimes also matches that of its prequel.

Icewind Dale II is a flawed game of highs and lows. The siege of Targos is definitely the former, but there is a tiresome grind through the middle levels of this game, which might be explained as padding put there to add to play time duration. This remains, however, a fitting farewell to the Infinity Engine. **NT**

Might and Magic IX

New World Computing, 2002
Windows

A game is only as good as the ones you compare it to. Nothing could be truer for *Might and Magic IX*, a game I nearly overlooked due to overwhelmingly negative reviews. I'm glad I didn't!

To be clear: *M&MIX* is by no means the best game in the series. Nearing bankruptcy, 3DO rushed out of the door what lead designer Timothy Lang himself described as a "pre-alpha at best". Bugs and crashes were so frequent that it was almost unplayable, while the game's shift to fully 3D graphics lacked polish and detail, with repetitive models and weird mirrored textures. Nevertheless, it did many things right.

The first thing you'll notice is the new class system. At character creation you can only choose between Fighter or Adept, but 12 specialised classes become available after completing special quests. Skills and abilities are still acquired via trainers scattered around the world, but now some spells require two (or even three!) different skills to cast. Although the levelling system is artificially capped at around Level 140 (as training becomes too expensive), it worked well enough to keep me motivated to grind on and reach insane levels of power, *Might and Magic*-style.

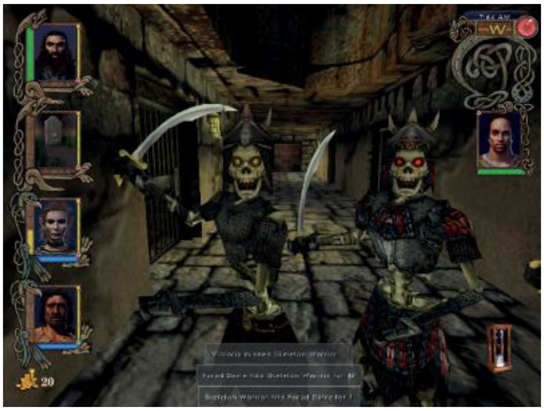
Combat was likewise overhauled. Gone are the legions of goblins and other critters forming lines to kill you. *M&MIX* focuses on smaller encounters, with fewer enemies. As such, the AI is vastly improved: flying enemies will circle around you, grunts will throw daggers, and stronger enemies revive their fallen comrades. Most are simple, but still distinctive.

While the initial dungeons are forgettable, later ones range from good to borderline great. One late-game dungeon is especially memorable, with armies of liches giving you a run for your money. Also, the game features a huge array of new weapons, with all kinds of status effects to equip and use.

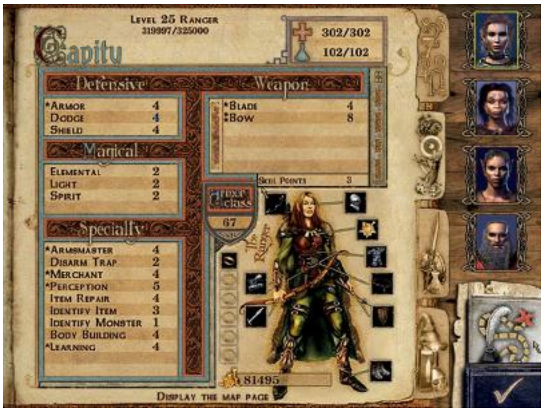
There are also some funny side-quests, and the non-existent story is almost *Monty Python*-esque in its randomness, including an old hag casually giving you a world-saving quest without any further explanation.

So, is *Might and Magic IX* worth a shot? That depends. If you only play polished RPGs then no, there are much better games out there. If, however, you want to experience what the *M&M* series could have become, then by all means give it a try. **DF**

Fans created the *1.3 community patch* to fix *M&MIX*. While the patch is excellent, some of the game's issues remain unresolved.

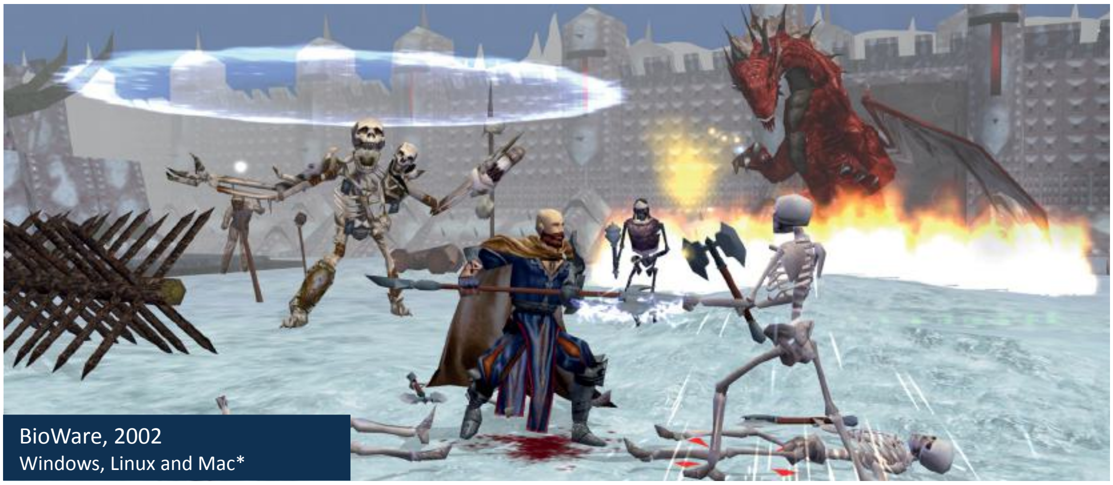


Combat can be played in either real-time or turn-based mode; while both are agile, casting spells and using items are cumbersome


Level 25 Ranger
319997/325000
Sapity
302/302
102/102
Defensive
Weapon
*Armor 4
Dodge 4
Shield 4
*Blade 4
*Bow 8
Magical
Elemental 2
Light 2
Spirit 2
Skill Points 3
Class
67
The Ranger
Specialty
*Armsmaster 4
Disarm Trap 2
*Merchant 4
*Perception 5
Item Repair 4
Identify Item 3
Identify Monster 1
Body Building 4
*Learning 4
81495
Display the map page

You're limited to two classes at character creation, but can later specialise into 12 other classes by performing special quests

Neverwinter Nights



BioWare, 2002
Windows, Linux and Mac*

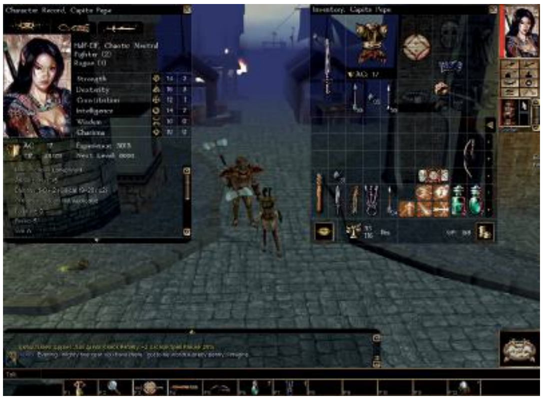
***Beamdog released the *Neverwinter Nights: Enhanced* Edition in 2018, adding improved graphics, better compatibility with modern PCs and new premium modules from Ossian Studios.**

BioWare carved its name into history with the creation of *Baldur's Gate I* and *II*, which are frequently brought up as the best examples of RPGs transitioned from tabletops to computers.

Naturally, this led to high expectations when *Neverwinter Nights* was announced, especially since it was another fantasy RPG, based on the 3rd edition of *D&D* this time around. Most people assumed it would be the successor to the venerable *Baldur's Gate*, but when the game launched it quickly became apparent things weren't so simple.

The mainstream saw it as BioWare's greatest achievement to date, streamlining gameplay for accessibility while retaining what makes *D&D* great. On the other hand, a large part of the RPG community found it to be a dumbed-down sham which didn't only fail as a successor to BioWare's previous works but was a terrible game all around. To understand these two perspectives, a step back is required.

Parties are a core aspect of most tabletop RPGs. Usually each player controls a single character, with the exception of the Dungeon Master, who controls as many as needed for each scenario.



The game uses the 3rd edition *D&D* ruleset and offers an extensive range of races, classes, spells, weapons, armour and items for players to experiment with

Since the majority of CRPGs are single-player experiences, they solved this by putting the player in charge of multiple characters at once. He or she is all the heroes at once, controlling them as they go through the content made by the developers – who could be considered an inflexible Dungeon Master.

Not every CRPG is like this, but most are, especially in the West. *Baldur's Gate* falls squarely in this category. *Neverwinter Nights* does not.

In *NWN* the player only controls a single character. Combat is still real-time-with-pause, just like in *Baldur's Gate*, but companions are restricted to one at a time (two with the expansions) and can only be given general orders, which is more akin to shouting directions than taking direct control.

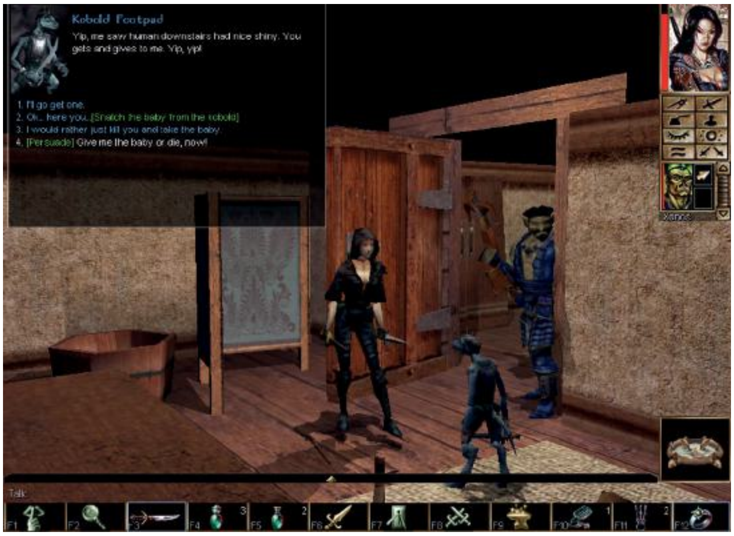
The reason for this controversial change was the ambition to emulate the true pen-and-paper experience by creating a multiplayer-focused RPG engine.

The project was built around the idea that the player would make a character and go online, joining a module in which several players would meet and form a party, while a human Dungeon Master controlled their adventures. It was meant to be a 1:1 conversion of physical RPGs into digital form.

To make this possible, the tools had to be not only powerful, but also simple to use. Anyone should be capable of running a campaign, editing the content on the fly and even creating entirely new campaigns.

This lead to an incredible engine with amazing modding capability. Players could play with a handful of friends online, but also create "permanent worlds" – customisable micro-MMOs with up to 96 players. Meanwhile, the Aurora Toolset allowed anyone to create their own adventures, something which can be attested by the absolutely stunning number (and quality) of mods that have been made over the years.

> “The toolset has affected many, many decisions along the way. Tiles. The entire reason to use a tile-based system was for the toolset, for ease of use in creation. We don’t want people to have to learn to use an app like *3D Studio Max* if they want to create an adventure. We want people to go in, create an adventure, jump, test it and have fun.”
>
> *– Trent Oster,* NWN*’s lead designer*


Kobold Footpad

Yip, me saw human downstairs had nice shiny. You gets and gives to me. Yip, yip!

1. I'll go get one.
2. Ok... here you. [Snatch the baby from the kobold]
3. I would rather just kill you and take the baby.
4. [Persuade] Give me the baby or die, now!

While the graphics have aged significantly, *NWN*’s camera and interface are still quite efficient – an impressive feat for an early 3D game

But all of this came at a cost – most of the five years of development was spent on the engine itself rather than the content. The result was that the game’s campaign was phoned in, to say the least.

The story revolves around a devastating plague gripping the city of Neverwinter – you must find the culprits and defeat the mandatory ancient evil at the end. The whole thing feels like a starting *D&D* module that drags on for far too long, aggressively ordering you to collect countless McGuffins. Combine this with some absolutely abysmal encounter design, in which the vast majority of combat can only be described as filler, and it’s something closer to a tech demo.

Fortunately, BioWare released two expansions in 2003, which showed them getting better at creating quality content. *Shadows of Undrentide* begins a new Level 1 adventure, as you hunt for a series of artefacts stolen from your tutor. Competent but nothing special. *Hordes of the Underdark* pits you against an invading Drow army, led by their queen, the Valsharess.

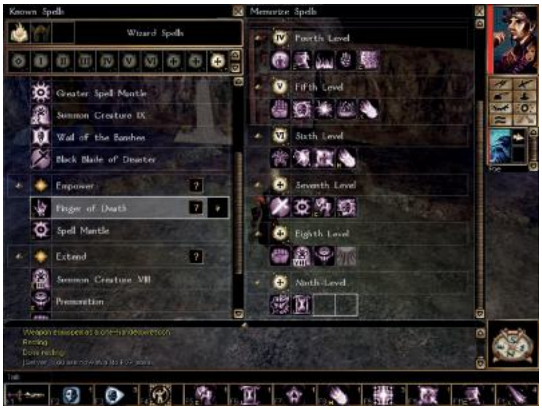
HotU can be described as easily one of BioWare’s best works – each chapter is laser-focused, whether it’s dungeon-crawling through the legendary *D&D* location Undermountain or exploring the mysterious Underdark and its terrible denizens.

If you take the launch version of *Neverwinter Nights*, bereft of all the content that came afterwards, then it’s clear that it’s an underwhelming product. But BioWare aggressively advertised that you weren’t buying a simple game inside a box – *NWN* is above all a platform for countless adventures.

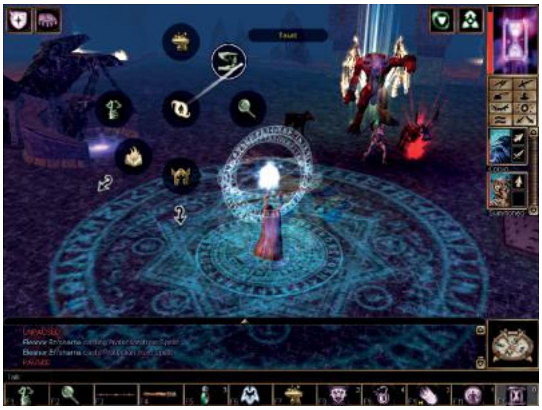
And it paid off. While the original campaign is best ignored, playing *Shadows of Undrentide* and *Hordes of the Underdark* back-to-back will give a more than satisfying journey from Level 1 to godhood. From there you can jump to the smaller premium modules or try some of the greatest mods ever made.

Just keep something in mind: they are that good partly because BioWare sacrificed so much for them to be possible. **LL**

Financial issues at Interplay made BioWare change publishers to Atari. This led to big changes in the game’s plot. A leaked document shows it was much more ambitious, with a madness meter, class-specific tutorials and an epic scope.

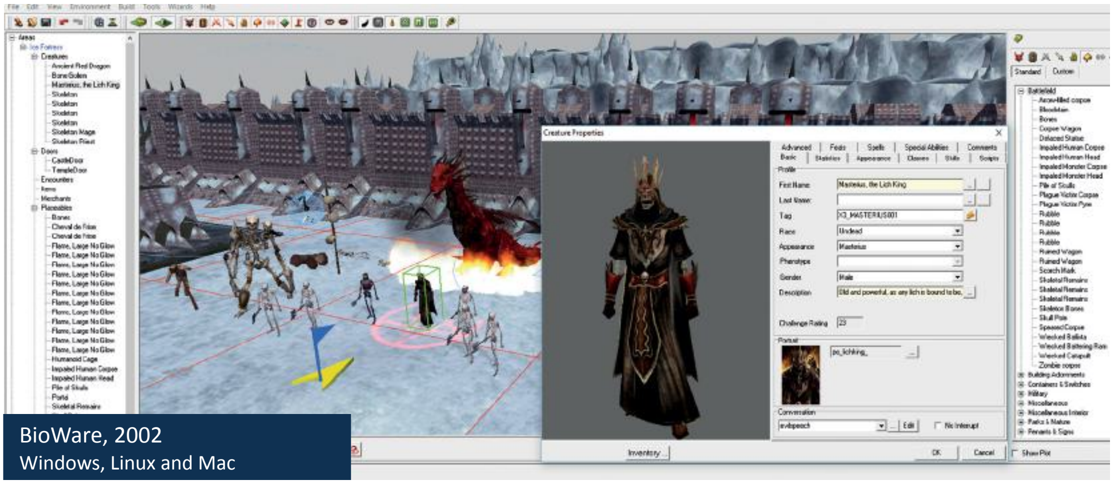


Fully employing *D&D*’s magic system, *NWN* has almost 300 spells, plus meta-magic feats and a few Epic Spells



Combat is as in *Baldur’s Gate*, but the 3rd edition *D&D* rules offer many new abilities, accessed via a radial menu

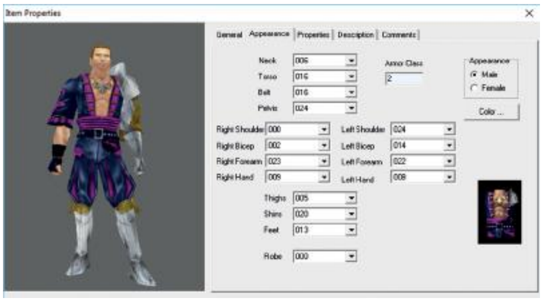
Neverwinter Nights: Aurora Toolset & Modules


BioWare, 2002
Windows, Linux and Mac

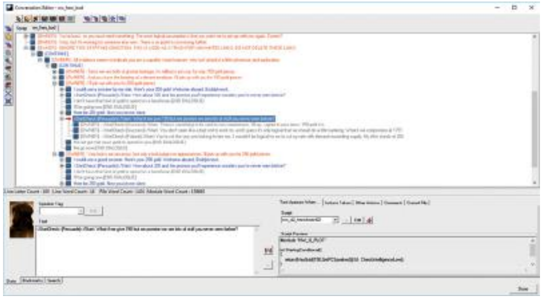
Creature Properties
First Name: Masterius, the Lich King
Tag: X3_MASTERIUS001
Race: Undead
Appearance: Masterius
Gender: Male
Description: Old and powerful, as any lich is bound to be,...
Challenge Rating: 23

Neverwinter Nights included a long campaign, but also, and more importantly, the exact toolset used by BioWare to make it. This was highly significant, but its importance would be easy to overlook. It meant that owners of the game were being given all the tools they needed to make a professional-quality RPG of their own, if they had the talent and were able to devote the time.

In the years since, many have done just that, producing thousands of modules, of which dozens (at least) of the best compare quite favourably to professionally produced RPGs. This makes the purchase of *NWN* perhaps the best deal in the history of RPGs since, by obtaining this one game, you gain the ability to play a huge and still expanding number of high-quality RPG campaigns.


Item Properties
Neck: 006
Torso: 016
Belt: 016
Pelvis: 024
Right Shoulder: 000
Right Bicep: 002
Right Forearm: 023
Right Hand: 009
Left Shoulder: 024
Left Bicep: 014
Left Forearm: 022
Left Hand: 008
Thighs: 005
Shins: 020
Feet: 013
Robe: 000
Armor Class: 2
Appearance: ● Male ○ Female

The powerful item editor allows you to mix and match several armour pieces or weapons to create unique equipment, then customise all its stats and powers


Part of what makes the *Aurora Toolset* special is how it offers powerful professional tools that are easy to use, such as its Conversation Editor

Of course *NWN* is hardly the only game to include some sort of toolset, map editor, or the like. Frequently, however, these editors are too limited in what they can do, not allowing users to make fully-fledged campaigns with all the features the professionals can include. Others are too difficult to use, requiring either greater technical skills or a larger team than the typical amateur modder can be expected to have access to.

NWN managed to avoid both these extremes. On the one hand, it was an enormously powerful tool allowing you to do everything BioWare did to make its campaigns, as well as making it fairly easy to alter many aspects of play to create campaigns of a very different type as well. On the other, learning how to use it is relatively easy. This ease of use also extends to the speed with which you can make content with it, another crucially important, and easily overlooked, feature for amateurs with limited time to devote to what is after all a hobby, and not a full-time job.

The *NWN* toolset does, of course, have some limitations, as, though extensive modifications can be made, any modules made with it will at their core be using the same fundamental system, one based on 3rd Edition *Dungeon & Dragons* rules. Therefore, for someone with creative game-related aspirations, attempting to make a separate indie game would certainly be an alternative to consider. *NWN* does offer two advantages over such a course, however.

First is the aforementioned speed with which a skilled toolset user can make content. In my own case, this factor in particular was a crucial consideration. I had ambitions to make a large, complex RPG campaign, comparable in length and scale to major commercial games, and I also wanted to release something this decade.

The Neverwinter Vault:

The official Neverwinter Nights Vault was hosted by IGN from 2002, but was shut down without warning in 2014. Thousands of mods, modules and fan-made content hosted there were only saved by the effort of a group of fans, who now host them at the new Neverwinter Vault – an invaluable resource, full of excellent fan-made adventures. Here are some of the best mods and modules you can play today:

Pretty Good Character Creator (PGC3) This handy trainer allow you to freely level up, equip and customise your character, testing it and preparing for other modules.

Aribeth's Redemption by Daniel Muth is kind of a sequel to *NWN*'s OC, focusing on Lady Aribeth. An example of how RPG romances should be written.

Almraiven and **Shadewood** by Fester Pot are extraordinary modules designed specifically for mages.

The Aielund Saga by Savant is a six-part epic module. The *NWN* OCs should have been something like this.

Black Thorn by El Dano represents an innovative use of the *NWN* toolset to make a murder mystery game.

Revenant by McV is another innovative, high-quality module in which one plays as an undead revenant attempting to solve his own murder.

The **Cave of Songs, Honor among Thieves** and **The Prophet** trilogy by Baldecaran includes some of the best (if usually grim and tragic) storytelling in *NWN* modules, and is generally among the best the Vault has to offer.

Sands of Fate by John McA is a trilogy for epic characters, which will take you from Level 25+ all the way to 40. Great for those who completed *Hordes of the Underdark*, or some other series taking you to the beginnings of epic levels, and are wondering what to do with their epic-level character.

Tales of Arterra by Kevin Chan is a high-quality two-part module series, with many allusions to classic RPGs like *Baldur's Gate* and *Planescape: Torment*.

Swordflight by Rogueknight333 is an ambitious, ongoing series featuring challenging tactical combat, old-school dungeon-crawling, extensive content and side-quests specific to class, race and alignment, and numerous role-playing opportunities.

Defense of Fort Tremagne by Guthlac is an excellent module combining good combat and role-playing.

Saleron's Gambit by Tiberius209 is a series of five high-quality modules for low-level characters, notable for its "low magic" approach. It is filled with Forgotten Realms lore and allusions to other classic games in that setting, such as *Baldur's Gate*.

Alazander's three modules should also not be overlooked by fans of the Forgotten Realms, with the second in the series, **Crimson Tides of Tethyr**, probably being the best.

The **Blackguard** series by Steve B., **Sapphire Star** by Yaballa, **Shadows of Darkmoon** by Commche, and **A Peremptory Summons** and **Siege of the Heavens** by Balkoth offer some very challenging combat to players looking to test their tactical skills.

Numerous pen-and-paper modules have also been converted into *NWN* modules. If there is one of which you have fond memories, there are good odds of finding a *NWN* version of it. Some of the best conversions are **C2: The Ghost Tower of Inverness** and **S4: The Lost Caverns of Tsojcanth** by SirOtus, **N1: Against the Cult of the Reptile God** by Rich Barker, **UK2: The Sentinel**, by Heresiologist, and **S1: Tomb of Horrors** by Ghool.

Persistent Worlds:

Some of *NWN*'s modules are designed to run online, like a small-scale MMO, with up to 96 players and a team of GMs that continuously directs play, adds new quests and expands the game. These are called persistent worlds. While it's been over 10 years since *NWN*'s release, there are still many persistent worlds around. You can find a listing and the status of all active ones here: https://nwnlist.herokuapp.com.

If you need help installing *Neverwinter Nights* and its mods, or want further module recommendations, then check out Lilura's excellent intro guide and blog posts.

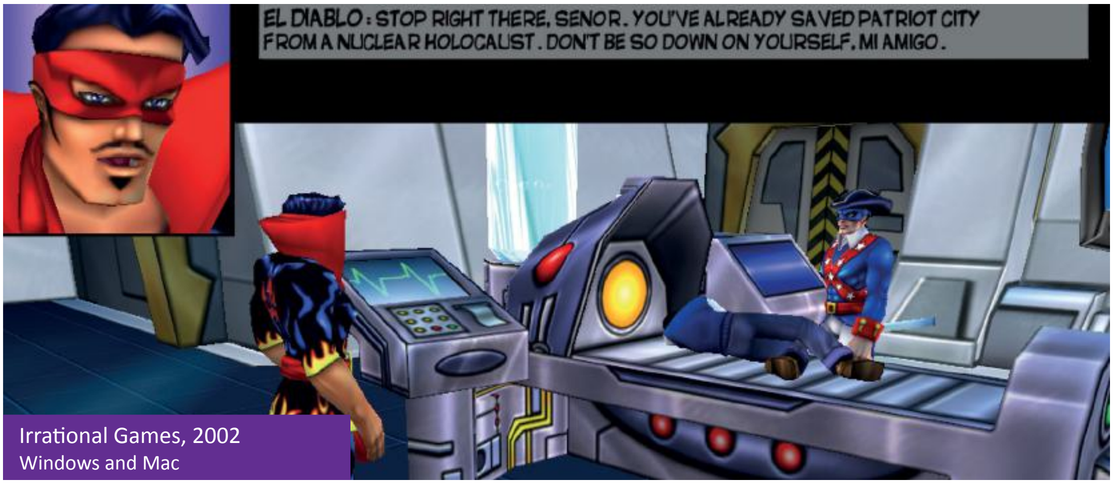
Had I been making an indie game, those would, realistically, have been mutually exclusive goals. Using the *NWN* toolset allowed me to spend my limited time working on the actual "meat" of the game, designing quests and encounters, writing dialogue, etc., and not waste it reinventing the wheel by designing a basic game system from scratch.

Second is the existence of an established community of players and modders who provide a ready-made audience and source of feedback for *NWN* toolset products, including many *D&D* players who are accustomed to playing a modular and customisable game.

This community is, alas, not as large these days as it once was, but still has the potential to greatly simplify the task of actually finding players for one's experiments in game-making. Players, too, can benefit from having an established and well-documented game system that does not require them to learn a completely new set of rules every time they start a new game.

The toolset is, in short, an extraordinary tool that has produced extraordinary results. You do not need to take my word for this, as countless high-quality modules can be found in the Neverwinter Vault. **RK**

Freedom Force


EL DIABLO: STOP RIGHT THERE, SENOR. YOU'VE ALREADY SAVED PATRIOT CITY FROM A NUCLEAR HOLOCAUST. DON'T BE SO DOWN ON YOURSELF, MI AMIGO.

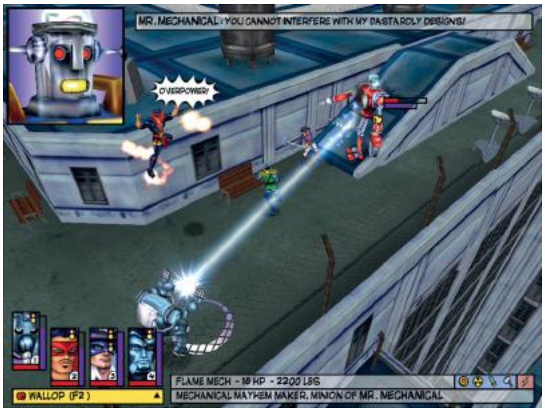
Irrational Games, 2002
Windows and Mac

In the early 2000s, superheroes and comic books were almost unexplored genres for computer games. There had been a few lacklustre releases, but they had failed to impress. All this changed with the release of *Freedom Force*.

From January to June 2005, the story of the first *Freedom Force* game was retold in a six-issue comic book miniseries published by Image Comics.

Published by Electronic Arts and Crave Entertainments, it was developed by Irrational Games, the team behind *System Shock 2*, featuring veterans of Looking Glass Studios, as well as the Australian side of the team who would co-develop it. The game would be a moderate success in terms of sales but break the "superhero game curse" and pave the way for much more successful ventures in the field.

A blatant homage and love letter to the Silver Age of comic books, *Freedom Force* featured a vibrant, colourful, and extremely ambitious engine, and a storyline that trod the well-travelled paths of comic book conventions. The characters introduced were based on classic archetypes from both the Marvel and DC universes, simple heroes acting out heroic fantasies where the good guys and the bad guys were clearly defined and there were no blurred lines.


MR. MECHANICAL: YOU CANNOT INTERFERE WITH MY DASTARDLY DESIGNS!
OVERPOWER!
WALLOP (F2)
FLAME MECH - 18 HP - 2200 LBS
MECHANICAL MAYHEM MAKER, MINION OF MR. MECHANICAL

The campaign progresses through several missions, with every third or fourth featuring a new "villain of the week"

The storyline introduction will be familiar to anyone who has watched Flash Gordon: the evil alien emperor Lord Dominion contaminates Earth with Energy X, a power source that grants amazing superhuman abilities to anyone who is exposed to its radiation. As Energy X canisters fall over Patriot City, an age of superheroes and villains is born.

In terms of gameplay, *Freedom Force* features an intuitive and accessible real-time-with-pause system, with a variety of powers at the player's disposal: one can use basic melee attacks, area effects, projectiles and beam attacks, as well as a number of special powers. Each of these comes with its own animations and effect bubbles – POW, WHACK, WHOOSH, etc. – making combat a colourful, exciting and instantly gratifying experience.

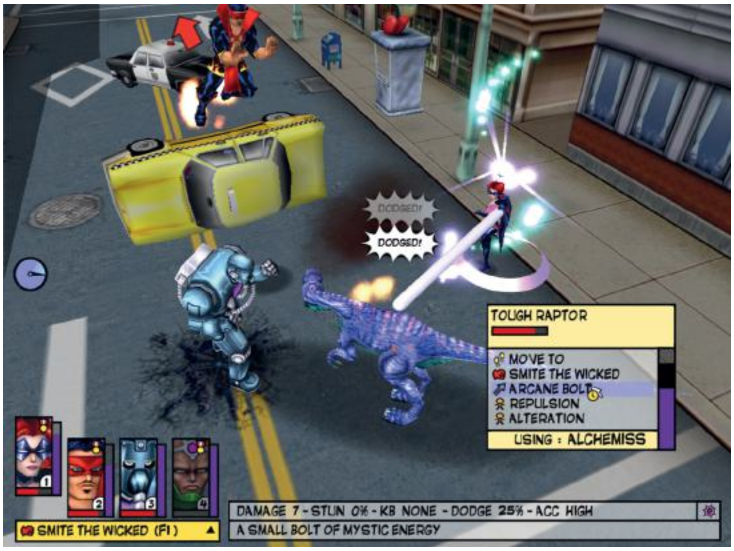
Beyond just performing fancy attacks, heroes can also fly, levitate, teleport, jump onto roofs, lift cars and throw them at enemies, etc. "Do whatever a superhero can do" kind of sums up the gameplay.

The game is further enhanced by the addition of the Prestige mechanic – a simple system whereby doing good deeds and achieving side-objectives like protecting citizens and bringing the guilty to justice earn favour with fellow heroes, allowing the player to recruit a larger roster of superheroes, each with their own unique abilities and uses. There are many little instances of these objectives hidden away on every map, and they add life and depth to the gameplay.

The imperative to protect the city and its inhabitants while pursuing the villains and main objectives also adds a pleasing level of complication and difficulty to the game, with the player having to split up their teams of heroes and oversee different events on various parts of the maps, as well as find the canisters of Energy X that litter the city.

"I think one of the most gratifying things about *Freedom Force* was the mod community, because it was insane! I always wanted to do something that was bigger than we could track. We never had that before, and it just got to become this thing that stood on its own. People made thousands and thousands and thousands and thousands of characters!"

– Ken Levine,
Freedom Force*'s writer*



Each hero has unique powers, but some can cost energy; once or twice per mission, heroes can use their heroic wills to restore energy or health

Included with the game was an intuitive tool for creating custom superheroes that could be used in the main campaign, taken online or used in the game's challenge maps. The game was also released with a suite of robust modding tools, leading to a massive frenzy of content creation by dedicated fans of the comic book genre. Hundreds of Marvel and DC superheroes were brought to life, and ambitious projects began to appear on numerous fan-sites, featuring custom animations, original maps, complete modifications and entirely new campaigns.

The future seemed assured for the franchise. However, as so often happens in this industry, legal complications arose as to who owned the rights to the intellectual property, the publishers or the developers, and there was a delay in the release of the sequel.

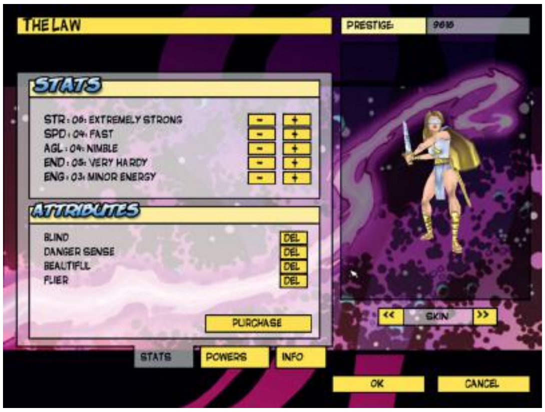
In the meantime, *City of Heroes* was released, a game covering much of the ground *Freedom Force* had trail-blazed and stealing some of its glory.

In 2005, the legal disputes were finally settled and *Freedom Force vs. the Third Reich* was released. A homage to the Golden Age of comic books, it featured a time-travelling plot in which the heroes of the first game had to face the villains of the Axis powers. The game was self-published by Irrational, but unfortunately failed to sell well, reputedly moving only about 40,000 copies.

Who can say why sales were so disappointing? The game improved on many aspects of the original, but a lot of the difficulty and little charming touches were lost. Maps became less interesting and objectives not so punishing or complicated, while combat played a much larger role and heroics less of one.

While the second game ended on an intriguing cliffhanger and concept art was made for a possible third game set in a more complex Bronze or Iron Age setting, to this day we still eagerly await the return of Patriot City's mightiest heroes. **NT**

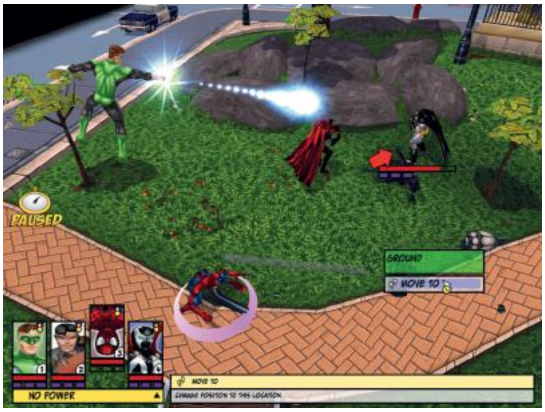
Fans not only created thousands of custom hero skins, but also huge mods with new campaigns based on the *Justice League*, *Suicide Squad* and other IPs. A good resource for them is Alex's Freedom Fortress.


THE LAW
PRESTIGE: 9616

STATS
STR : 06: EXTREMELY STRONG
SPD : 04: FAST
AGL : 04: NIMBLE
END : 05: VERY HARDY
ENG : 03: MINOR ENERGY

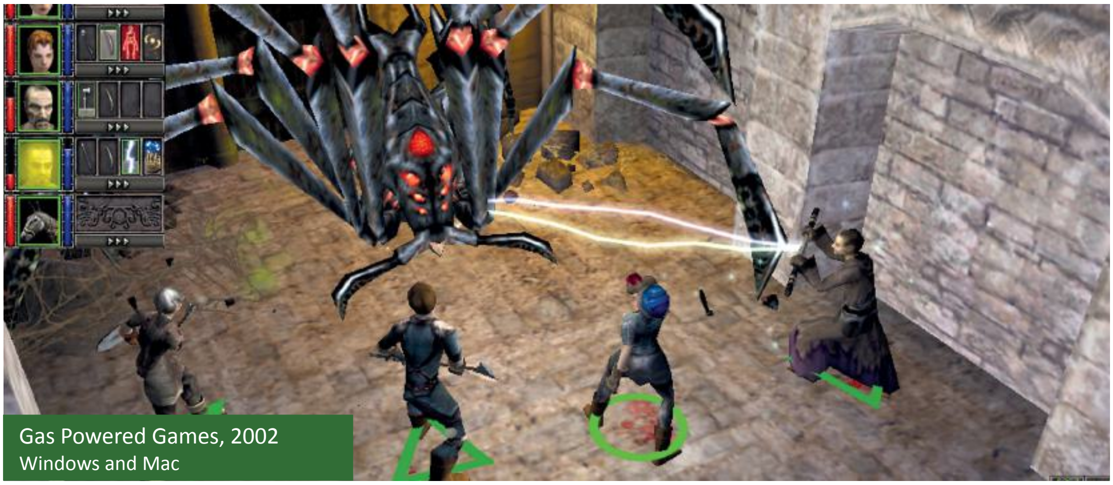
ATTRIBUTES
BLIND
DANGER SENSE
BEAUTIFUL
FLIER

Character customisation uses a clever point-buy system with attributes, disadvantages and customisable powers



Freedom Force vs. the Third Reich further expanded the modding support, allowing for crazier superhero teams

Dungeon Siege



Gas Powered Games, 2002
Windows and Mac

***Dungeon Siege I* and *II* are both available on Steam, but their expansions and multiplayer modes have been removed. Guides can be found on the Steam Community Forum to enable them and also play in higher resolutions.**

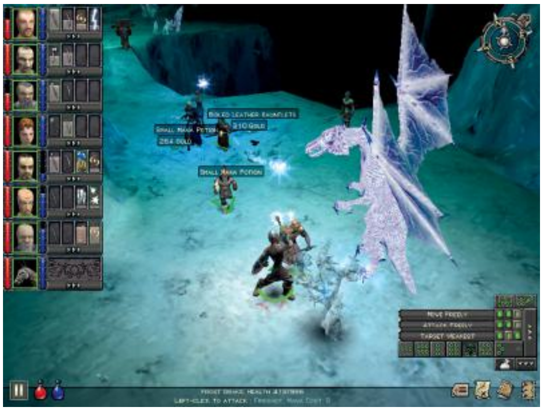
Now a mostly forgotten game, it's amusing to recall that *Dungeon Siege* was an eagerly awaited blockbuster back in the early 2000s – a "*Diablo*-killer", made by Chris Taylor, the man behind the legendary RTS *Total Annihilation*.

Taylor's pitch was powerful: an epic action RPG set in a huge, seamless world, with cutting-edge 3D graphics and a large party of characters, but with an intuitive RTS-like control system that's accessible to anyone – be it a hardcore RPG fan or a total beginner.

Published by Microsoft Studios and promoted by a massive marketing campaign, it was met with very positive reviews upon release and sold almost two million copies – an impressive feat in 2002.

So why isn't *Dungeon Siege* celebrated among the pantheon of classic RPGs? How can such a commercially and critically successful title fall into history's limbo?

The answer is simple: *Dungeon Siege* did indeed have great graphics and an amazing soundtrack, and was easy for anyone to play. But it's also a rather forgettable game that lasts so long and stretches itself so thin that few players endure to the finish.



Characters in Dungeon Siege will usually just keep using the same attack or spell in every battle – while this makes the game very accessible, the player is left with little to do

You start the game by naming your character. There are no races, classes or even experience points; everything revolves around three stats – Intelligence, Strength and Dexterity. They increase as you use them: fire a lot of arrows and your Dexterity will go up, boosting damage and allowing you to use better bows.

The much-lauded seamless world is impressive; you travel from forests to towns to mines without a single loading screen. But you'll soon realise this world is a long and narrow corridor – you'll just keep marching in one direction and fighting for 40 hours. The *Legends of Aranna* expansion only made things worse, adding even more length instead of depth.

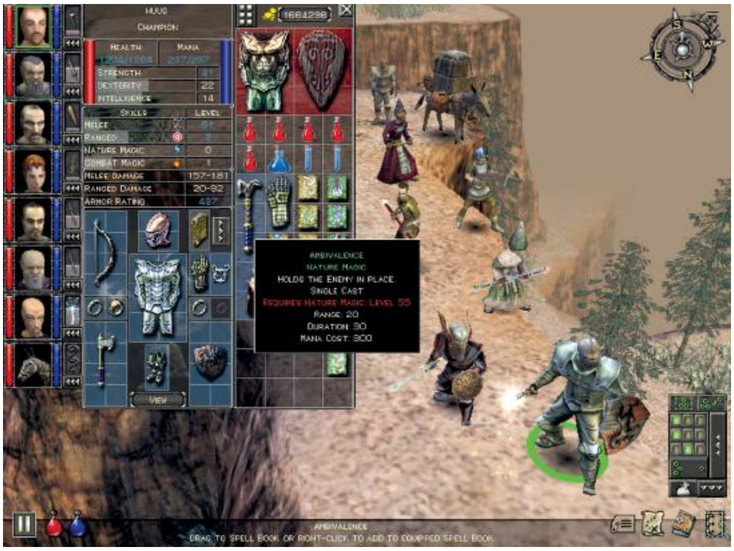
You'll meet a few recruitable NPCs as you travel, gathering a party of up to eight heroes. Sadly, they're all devoid of personality or relevance to the barely-present plot – even the main hero can be safely dismissed or left for dead. The most memorable characters in *Dungeon Siege* are the pack mules: they follow the party around, carrying loot and kicking enemies.

Despite the large party size, combat is mostly automatic. Due to the improve-by-use system, your characters play limited roles – those with a bow will just keep shooting arrows, while melee warriors will always hack-and-slash. With no skills or special abilities to manage, there's little to do besides repositioning characters and healing them with spells or potions.

The game has a multiplayer mode in which you can play with up to seven friends, each controlling one character – which makes combat even duller. Oddly, it takes place in an entirely new area that's not only bigger, but non-linear! It's such a step up that mods were created to make it playable in single-player. Speaking of mods, the game had a powerful editor tool, leading to many fan-made modules (called "siegelets"), including the famous *Ultima V* and *VI* remakes.

"We failed to understand the economics of game development. Our budget was okay, but it wasn't the budget of the products we were competing against. What happens is that the quality of the experience gets thin, you start to phone it in a little bit on some of the levels because there's just not enough time to do it right. We should have done a shorter game – have people get through the game, then say, 'OK, I'm done. I had a great time, now I'm ready for the next one'."

– Chris Taylor,
Dungeon Siege*'s project lead*



Strength
Dexterity 22
Intelligence 14
Skills Level
Melee
Ranged
Nature Magic 0
Combat Magic 1
Melee Damage 157-181
Ranged Damage 20-92
Armor Rating 487

AMBIVALENCE
NATURE MAGIC
HOLDS THE ENEMY IN PLACE
SINGLE CAST
REQUIRES NATURE MAGIC: LEVEL 55
RANGE: 20
DURATION: 30
MANA COST: 300

AMBIVALENCE
DRAG TO SPELL BOOK OR RIGHT-CLICK TO ADD TO EQUIPPED SPELL BOOK

While the game was streamlined to be accessible, the large party and the lack of town portals means players will spend a lot of time managing several small inventories

Dungeon Siege II arrived in 2005, adding much-needed depth: several races to choose from, classes, skill trees, item sets, pets, enchantments, puzzles, town portals, side-quests, dialogue trees, companions with more personality, smarter enemies, etc.

Now there are enough side-quests, magical items and secret areas to make exploration worthwhile, and the player has a more active role in combat, thanks to special abilities. The party size has been reduced to four, but can grow to six if you finish the game and start again in a higher difficulty – or simply use mods.

The game still suffers from a generic setting and remains shallow next to rivals like *Diablo II* or *Sacred,* but the pleasure of sending your heroes bulldozing through armies of enemies reached its apex here.

While *Dungeon Siege 2* is easily the best game in the series, it failed to replicate its predecessor's impact. Microsoft dropped it, so Gas Powered Games signed with 2K Games for *Dungeon Siege II: Broken World*, a lacklustre expansion pack. After that, the series jumped between various developers, abandoning the "party-based *Diablo*" aspect that made it unique.

Dungeon Siege: Throne of Agony (2007) was a hack-and-slash for the PSP, similar to console titles like *Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance* and *Champions of Norrath.*

Then came *Space Siege* (2008), a sci-fi spin-off that tried to be "*Diabl*o with guns". It offered the choice of remaining human or slowly replacing body parts with cybernetic upgrades, but its combat never went beyond "stand still and shoot".

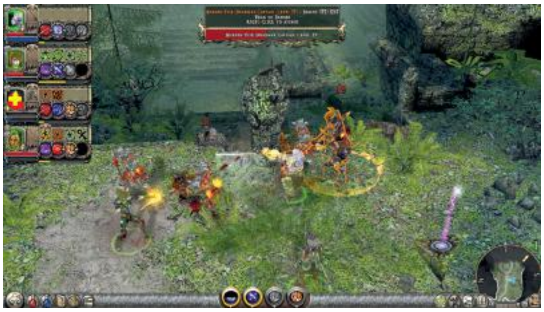
Lastly we have *Dungeon Siege III* (2011), developed by Obsidian Entertainment. An action RPG designed for consoles, it allowed you to play as a fighter, mage, fire elemental or gunslinger. While not a bad game, it stands as Obsidian's least interesting title – just another entry in a series now synonymous with bland action RPGs. **FE**

In 2007 infamous movie director Uwe Boll made *In the Name of the King: A Dungeon Siege Tale*, a movie starring Jason Statham and loosely based on the plot of the first game. It was followed by two direct-to-video sequels.

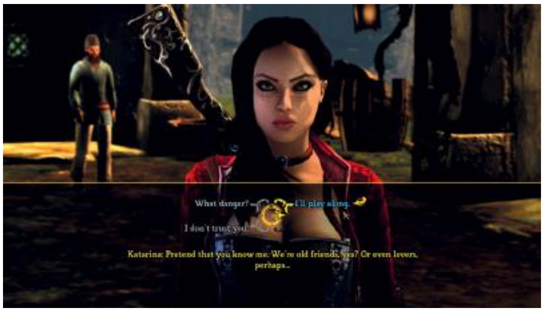
Mods:

Dungeon Siege had hundreds of siegelets and mods, but many were lost when the official website went offline. Fans still host several of them at www.ds.gemsite.org.

We suggest the *Lands of Hyperborea* and *Mageworld* siegelets, the *Monty Haul* mod, the *Ultima V* and *VI* remakes and the *Dungeon Siege II Legendary Mod*.

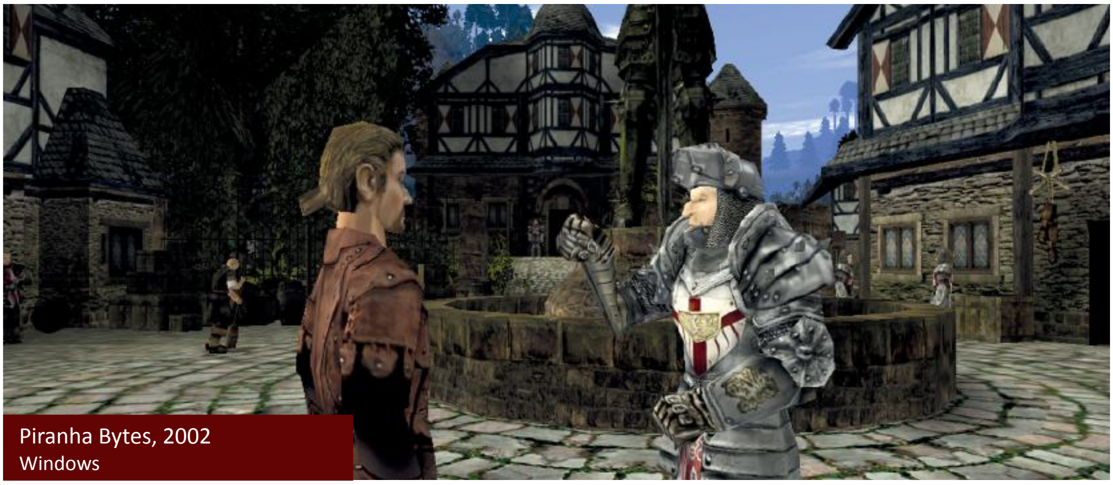


Dungeon Siege II is still somewhat bland, but adds depth to the systems, delivering a satisfying party-based *Diablo*-like


What danger?
I'll play along.
I don't trust you.
Katarina: Pretend that you know me. We're old friends, yes? Or even lovers, perhaps...

A console-oriented single-character RPG made by Obsidian, *Dungeon Siege III* has little to do with the first two games

Gothic II



Piranha Bytes, 2002
Windows

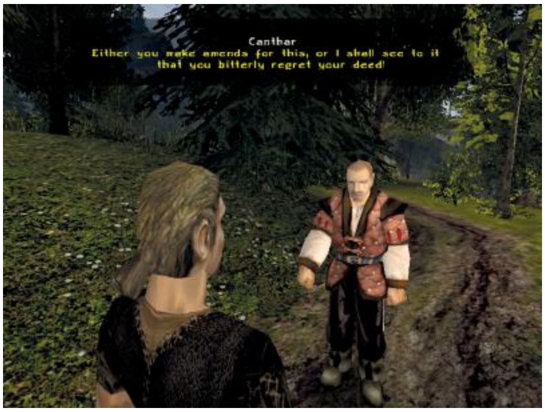
I will never forget reaching the city of Khorinis for the first time and asking a local for directions. The busy craftsmen, bored patrol guards, drunken layabouts and preaching mage made a simple walk from the town hall to the harbour a lifelong memory.

***Gothic II* was voted "RPG of the Year" by German magazines like 4players and GameStar, but the game was heavily criticised in the US for its graphics, difficulty and slower pace.**

Piranha Bytes had already set a new standard for what open-world action RPGs could be with *Gothic,* and the sequel took it further. From the mundane animations of the urban inhabitants to the warning growls animals give before becoming aggressive, the *Gothic* formula has always been about creating atmosphere through subtlety.

The game shows its dedication to this concept by how spartan its details are. The minimalistic HUD only has health and mana bars at the bottom of the screen, interaction cues are a floating name with a simple brightening effect, and the inventory only takes a small part of the screen and does not pause the game.

There is no flourish, only straightforward clean function, because the world of *Gothic II* can speak for itself. And what it reveals is a deadly world where going from zero to hero has never been as satisfying.



Canthar
Either you make amends for this, or I shall see to it that you bitterly regret your deed!

You are free to side with whoever you want, and rob or even kill them, but there will be consequences: they might refuse to trade or train you, and some will attack you on sight

Your character is a nobody who can barely take on oversized rodents; thus, people will harass or try to rob you, while running headlong into the wilderness will result in an early grave. The solution to this is to fight smarter, not harder.

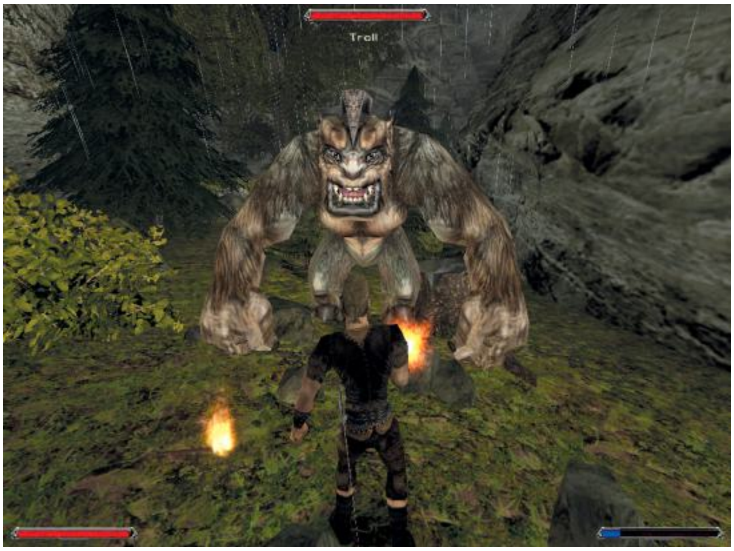
Most of the early game takes place in the aforementioned city of Khorinis and its urban quests allow for different approaches. Impressing an influential craftsman by retrieving an Orc weapon sounds impossible given the power of these creatures, but going on a forest trip with a skilled hunter or investigating the rumour about a limping Orc that's hiding in a cave after being shot by the guards might reveal new solutions that weren't apparent at first. These alternatives are not hinted at by the original quest-givers, thus giving a wonderful sense of interconnectedness to the entire experience.

Stumbling into new quests that are linked with old or unknown ones makes the world of *Gothic II* feels like a tightly-knit, believable adventure, rather than the disjointed theme park with no quest overlap that most RPGs indulge in. This is further reinforced by the faction dynamic between the militia of the city, the landowners' mercenaries and the mages' monastery. All of this is complemented by the dry German dialogue that, while no literary masterpiece, does wonders when it comes to taming the generally sanguine elements fantasy stories love to indulge in.

Just as the quests demand more from the player than just following instructions from point A to B, so does the combat encourage attention and observation rather than button-mashing perseverance. The player's attacking and defensive options are both timing-based; your block move only lasts for a fraction of a second; and attacks must be chained based on timed clicks for a combo to be pulled off.

"The world of *Gothic* is much closer to reality – the way people talk, their motivations and surroundings, even down to the colour palette we chose, is all about creating a world that is a step away from the high-fantasy fare that we see so often in the genre."

– Kai Rosenkranz,
Gothic II*'s artist and composer*



The Gothic series has less combat than most other RPGs, but every single enemy is meaningful and can be deadly; they are used as objectives or obstacles, not as cannon fodder

Given the diverse range of enemies, each with its own animation set, learning to duel successfully feels like an earned skill by the end rather than a reward for your avatar's numbers going up. Of course, the combat wouldn't be half as effective at feeling rewarding if it wasn't for the world being filled with expertly crafted locations and hand-placed loot that make it all the more satisfying when you finally beat the enemy that blocked your path 20 hours ago.

Magic sidesteps a lot of the combat's complexity, usually devolving into slinging your favourite damage spell or summoning an army of undead critters if you want to avoid fighting altogether.

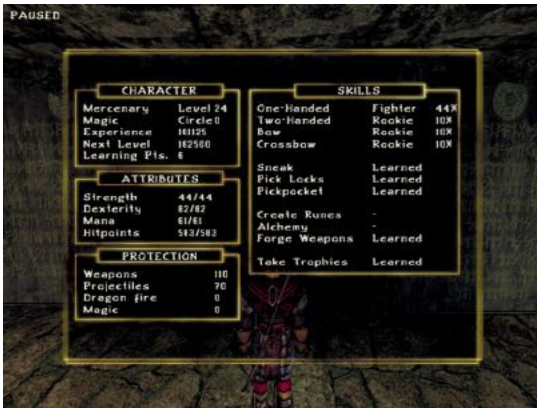
However, the game's merits lie in world-building and presentation. You don't just pick the Mage class and start shooting fireballs left and right; you have to go to their monastery, pay an exorbitant entrance fee and then spend your time doing mundane quests before being allowed to practise the mystical arts.

Just like its predecessor, *Gothic II* goes to great lengths to instil the mysterious and esoteric nature of magic, and that it's something that needs to be earned.

A word of warning: every English release of *Gothic II* comes with the *Night of the Raven* expansion. This adds a new region and quite a few quality quests to the base game, but also raises the difficulty significantly in response to fan complaints. Newcomers should be aware that perseverance is key in the early parts.

I'd be lying if I said that *Gothic II* maintains its level of quality throughout; indeed, many fans like me bemoan the fact the end tends to degenerate into mediocre dungeon-crawling and exploration is a lot less satisfying. But even with that in mind, the game is still more than worthy of being experienced from start to finish for its still-unmatched, harsh-but-fair exercise in open-world design. One can only wonder how open-world RPGs would look today if *Gothic* instead of *The Elder Scrolls* had shaped their progress. **LL**

There's still a community of *Gothic* players creating mods. In 2021, a Polish team released *The Chronicles of Myrtana: Archolos,* a fantastic total conversion mod that got over 10,000 positive reviews on Steam.


PAUSED

CHARACTER	
Mercenary	Level 24
Magic	Circle 0
Experience	161125
Next Level	162500
Learning Pts.	6

ATTRIBUTES	
Strength	44/44
Dexterity	82/82
Mana	61/61
Hitpoints	583/583

PROTECTION	
Weapons	110
Projectiles	70
Dragon fire	0
Magic	0

SKILLS		
One-Handed	Fighter	44%
Two-Handed	Rookie	10%
Bow	Rookie	10%
Crossbow	Rookie	10%
Sneak	Learned	
Pick Locks	Learned	
Pickpocket	Learned	
Create Runes	-	
Alchemy	-	
Forge Weapons	Learned	
Take Trophies	Learned	

Gothic II keeps its predecessor's unique character system, so you'll have to find trainers to improve your stats and skills

Mods:

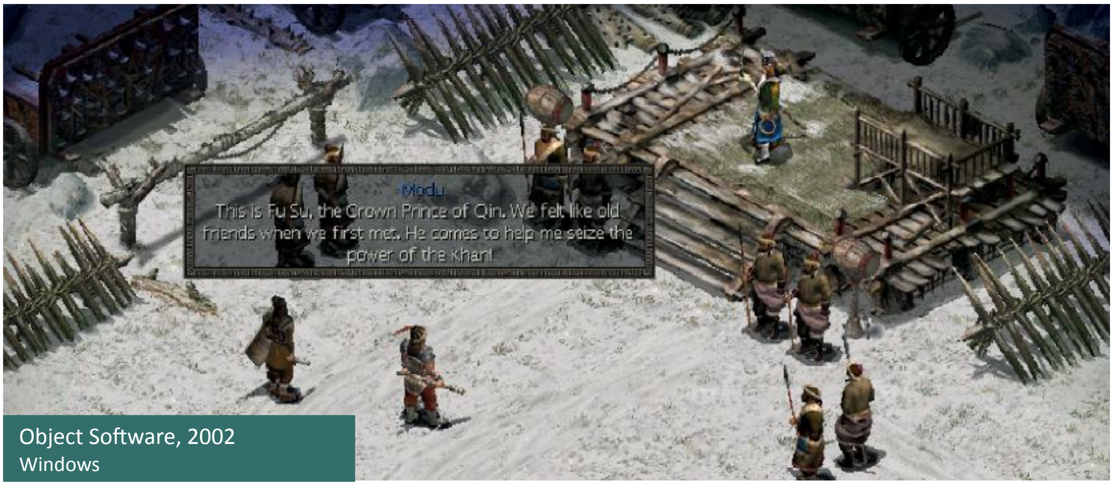
SystemPack: A patch that updates the *Gothic* engine, allowing for better draw distances, higher resolutions, more stability and the use of several mods.

D3D11-Renderer: A huge graphical update to the engine, adding more vegetation, dynamic shadows, better performance and other improvements.

L'Hiver: A large mod pack that adds new items, enemies, HD textures, tweaks and features like hunger/thirst. It brings some heavy changes to the game, so might be better if kept for a second playthrough.

Velaya - Tale of a Warrior: A popular fan-made adventure set after the events of *Gothic II*. It tells the story of a women in search of glory and lasts about 40 hours.

Prince of Qin

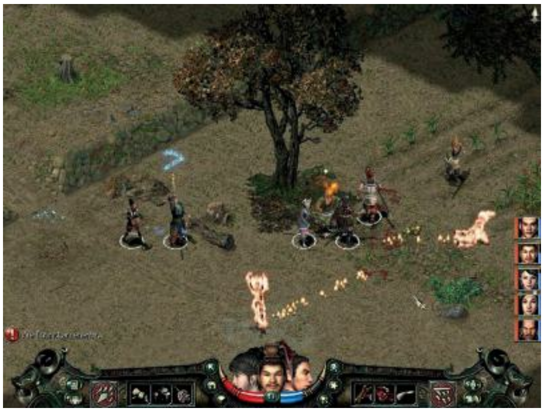

Modu

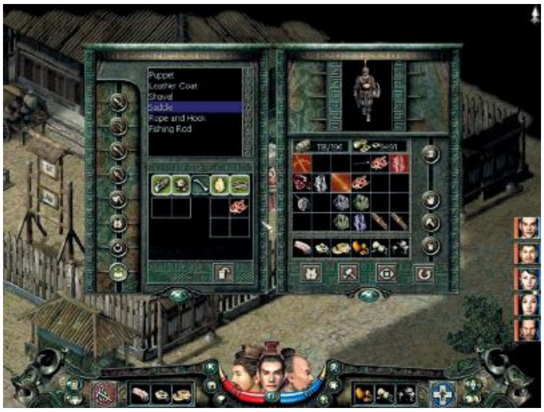
This is Fu Su, the Crown Prince of Qin. We felt like old friends when we first met. He comes to help me seize the power of the Khan!

Object Software, 2002
Windows

You can download a modified .exe file to play *Prince of Qin* in higher resolutions, with widescreen support.

Prince of Qin is a fascinating game, with aspects both familiar and alien to a Western gamer. Like *Baldur's Gate*, it's a real-time-with-pause, isometric CRPG in which you form a party from a number of NPCs you meet along the way. As in *Divine Divinity*, you can learn special abilities through skill trees in order to later perform them in combat via an expendable mana pool. Also like *Divine Divinity*, it's commonly mistaken for just another *Diablo* clone.


You form a party from a large cast of companions, representing five different classes; it's also important to consider the elements of each character and enemy, as they'll heavily impact battles



Prince of Qin features an excellent crafting system: there are five categories of ingredient, each featuring a wide variety of items and abilities

Despite these influences, *Prince of Qin* runs in a completely unique direction, using a magic and combat system based upon five elements (Fire, Water, Wood, Metal and Earth), where some elements are stronger or weaker against the others, similar to rock-paper-scissors or *Pokémon*. Each character and enemy has an element associated with them, so you have to keep this in mind in larger fights.

You play a prince called Fu Su, a historical figure from one of the many chaotic periods of ancient China. The actual Fu Su died through nefarious political manoeuvres, but the game twists events to enable him to survive and act against his conspirators. Sadly, a wonky translation and bad voice acting dampen the storytelling.

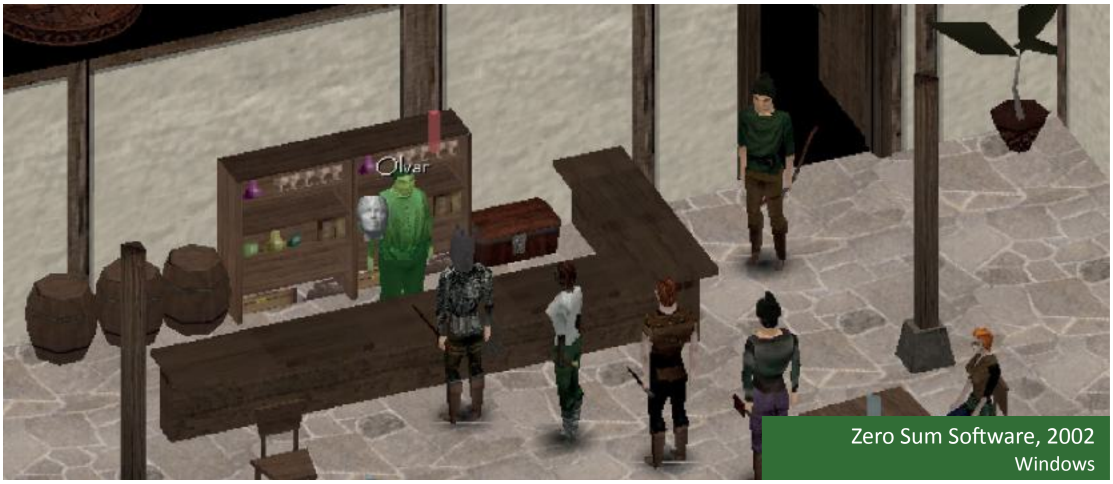
Exploration is interesting, since the enemies are fairly diverse through the middle of the game, and many of the side-quests are long and related to the game's historical lore. One satisfying aspect is that you can fail a quest if you do not make the correct decisions – it may frustrate some players, but it forces you to think about the consequences of your actions.

A poorer game design decision was the inclusion of respawning enemies in certain areas, as they respawn so quickly that your party might get overwhelmed.

Prince of Qin also came with a multiplayer mode, in which you could play a separate (and simpler) campaign that could support up to 500 players playing in an MMO-like fashion. Its success, mainly in China, led to the release of the online-only stand-alone expansion *Prince of Qin Online - The Overlord of Conquerors* (2003) – later renamed *World of Qin*.

Object Software did still release a great single-player prequel called *Seal of Evil* (2004), with more magical elements and a story showcasing events that led to the creation of the Qin Empire, and *World of Qin 2* (2005), a fully fledged MMO. **DT**

Pyrrhic Tales: Prelude to Darkness



Zero Sum Software, 2002
Windows

The word "play" is a description ill-suited to what it means to engage with *Prelude to Darkness*. Ludic archaeology is more accurate. This is a deeply unfinished and broken game. One hour of interrupted gameplay will seem like a miracle after the umpteenth crash. And each crash provides a momentary distraction from the inscrutable UI and unappealing graphics. But this isn't a game to be played, it's a game to be studied. Beyond all the technical dross lies one of the most ambitious RPGs ever attempted.

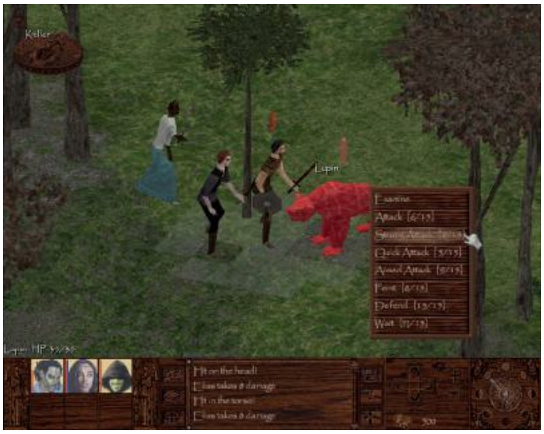
This is immediately obvious from the character creation. The main characters can have different bloodlines, backgrounds, attributes, skills and spells. Various UI tooltips hint at the game's depth with warnings of having low intelligence or low charisma.

The role of the player-controlled party is to keep the peace in the Valley, a region defined by an uneasy covenant between the urban "Children of the Flame" and rural "Riverfolk". Given the monstrous antagonists introduced from the get-go, it is clear that *PtD* wears its high-fantasy trappings on its sleeve. But there is still a wonderful sense of the mundane that elevates the atmosphere, in spite of the shoddy visuals.

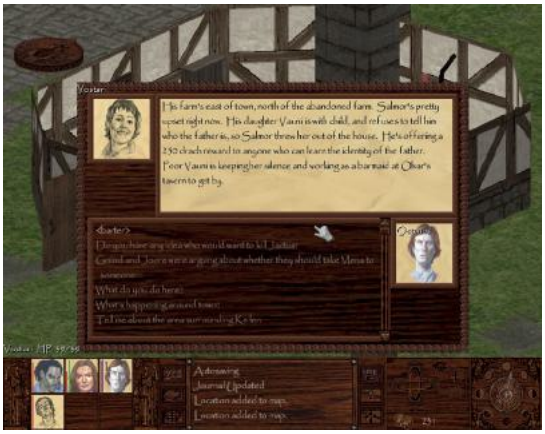
The crowning jewels, though, which make *PtD* surpass the likes of *Fallout* (in intention, not execution), are its quest design and reactivity. Learning new spells involves going to trainers, with each spell having an associated quest. If no one in the party is literate then quests don't get written in the journal. A male character asking for a shaved head is a non-issue, while the barber is shocked if a female character does the same. A woman is kept asleep by a magical amulet that will kill her if removed, something that the player is prompted to do unless they have sufficiently high magical knowledge. This is the stuff lifelong gaming memories are made of while, hopefully, the technical issues fade with time.

Make no mistake, this is a connoisseurs' item of worship: the very antithesis of a "fun time" for those who want to be whisked away into a fantasy RPG. Novelty seekers who want to dig deep are in for a good deal of infuriating drudgery. But, eventually, they will both marvel at what the game is and be heartbroken at what the game could have been. **LL**

Prelude to Darkness **was first released as shareware, with payment required for the full game. Since 2006 it has been freely available. In 2022, a group of fans got the source code and made a version that runs on modern PCs.**



Combat is turn-based, using an action-point system; you start with three characters and can recruit up to three more

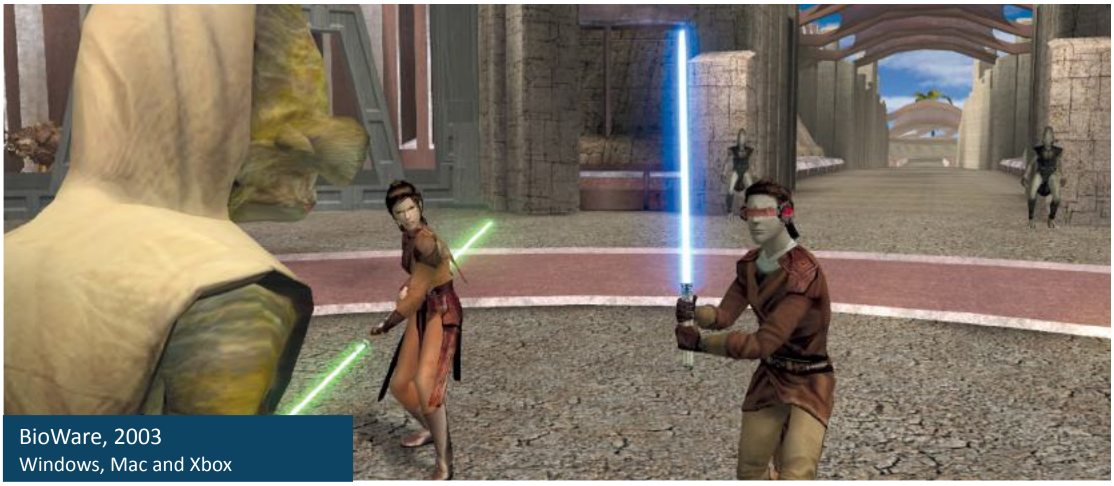


His farm's east of town, north of the abandoned farm. Salmor's pretty upset right now. His daughter Vauni is with child, and refuses to tell him who the father is, so Salmor threw her out of the house. He's offering a 250 drach reward to anyone who can learn the identity of the father. Poor Vauni is keeping her silence and working as a barmaid at Olvar's tavern to get by.

What do you do here?
What's happening around town?
Tell me about the area surrounding Kelen

PtD's quests have multiple solutions; some will present moral choices while others will offer different leads to follow, depending on your characters and skills

Star Wars:
Knights of the Old Republic


BioWare, 2003
Windows, Mac and Xbox

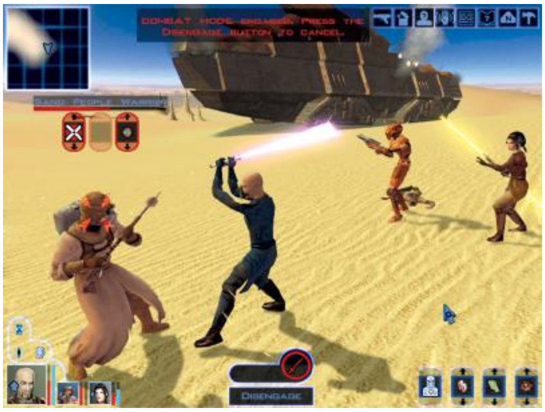
***SW:KotOR* was first released for the Xbox. It was the fastest selling game for that console at the time. The PC port came out five months later.**

Knights of the Old Republic is not only the first *Star Wars* CRPG, but also a turning point for BioWare. It's the moment when it abandoned its PC roots in favour of more console-oriented games, which led to deep changes and simplifications, from the controls and UI to the combat and level design.

Thankfully, despite some rather awkward design choices, *KotOR* provides ample entertainment with its enjoyable story, teeming with a sense of adventure.

The game takes place roughly 4,000 years before the movies, an era documented in the *Tales of the Jedi* comics. At that time, the Republic is slowly losing the war against the Sith Empire, led by Darth Malak. It's an exciting setting, but it's unfortunate that BioWare chose to use the modern *Star Wars* look from the movies, instead of the brilliant, rustic aesthetic of the comics.

The player, a Republic soldier who discovers in himself the ability to use the Force, goes on a journey during which the fate of the war will be decided. The game is particularly famous for its plot twist, although I think BioWare has failed to realise the full potential of it, as it can feel underdeveloped.



Combat is real-time-with-pause and allows you to queue a set of actions for each character

Regardless, the plot and side-quests are great. *KotOR* delivers that overall feeling of a *Star Wars* adventure, both in content and themes, and does it gracefully, offering many choices which move you towards either the Light or Dark Side of the Force – ultimately resulting in a change of appearance and stats.

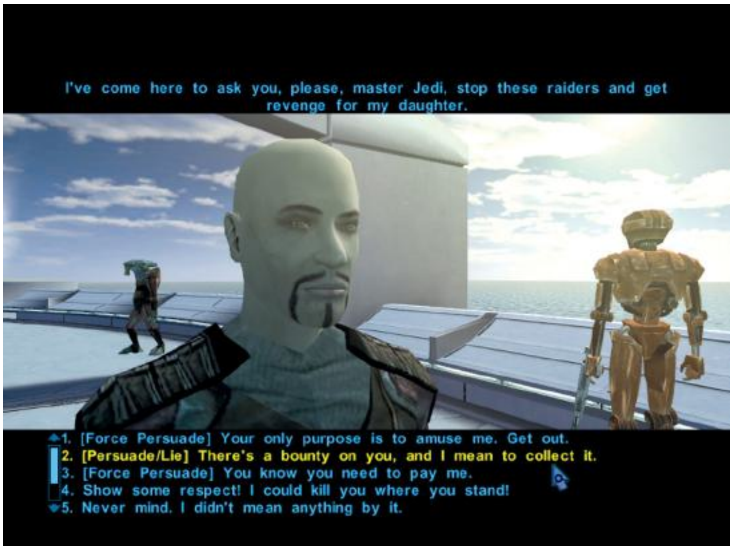
During these adventures, you will gather nine companions, with whom you'll travel the galaxy aboard the starship Ebon Hawk, although only two of them can accompany him at a time. The prologue and the ending are linear, but the game opens up in between, giving players the opportunity to visit four planets and complete their quests in any order.

The game offers many interesting places, like the planet Manaan, whose inhabitants are getting wealthy from exporting medical resources to both sides of the war. Fearful of showing any sign which may be seen as a preference for either of them, they desperately try to stay neutral in the ongoing conflict. We'll also visit the Sith Academy on Korriban, where every student learns to betray another, and more advanced ones take courses in the fleeting art of double-crossing.

Among your party members, certainly the most interesting is the old, former Jedi, Jolee Bindo. His positive attitude, wit, cynicism and wisdom comes out as a perfect mixture for an engaging companion. A fan favourite, the Assassin droid HK-47 is also enjoyable, although in this first game he feels a little like a one-trick pony. However, the main bad guy, Darth Malak, rings hollow, like some expendable villain-of-the-week.

Sadly, the combat is *KotOR's* weakest aspect. It features real-time-with-pause battles, which allow you to queue actions for each party member, but anyone expecting complexity or a tactical challenge similar to that of *Baldur's Gate II* will be gravely disappointed.

> “I thought we managed to pull off a twist that almost had the same impact as when Darth Vader revealed to Luke that he was his father. We used *The Sixth Sense* as a guide for how a good twist was pulled off. One of the lessons from that movie was that you had to leave enough clues that a sizeable percentage of the audience would figure out the twist before you revealed it. If you didn’t leave enough clues, then the twist would ring false.”
>
> *– James Ohlen,*
> Star Wars: KotOR*’s lead designer*



I've come here to ask you, please, master Jedi, stop these raiders and get revenge for my daughter.

1. [Force Persuade] Your only purpose is to amuse me. Get out.
2. [Persuade/Lie] There's a bounty on you, and I mean to collect it.
3. [Force Persuade] You know you need to pay me.
4. Show some respect! I could kill you where you stand!
5. Never mind. I didn't mean anything by it.

The role-playing options are some of the best among BioWare’s games, especially once you learn how to use the Force

The game offers a few different skills, but your choices are irrelevant, as any will work well enough against the enemies, who lack strong resistances or hard counters. Thus, there’s no need for a change of tactics during encounters, and only sporadically will you use some healing. All encounters practically play themselves until the final boss, when there’s a radical spike in difficulty. Keeping all weaknesses in mind, the sword/lightsaber fighting animations are top-notch – definitely combat’s strongest aspect.

The soundtrack was composed by the famous Jeremy Soule and it’s full of pathos, yet subtly melodic. It’s fitting for the game and manages to touch player emotions while feeling very *Star Wars*-y.

Overall, *KotOR* achieves everything it wanted to achieve. We may sometimes be disappointed that it didn’t aim higher, but that would be foolish, as it does provide a great experience. Besides, any desire for something more ambitious can be sated by its sequel.

The feeling of *Star Wars* is very strong with this one, and it’s a game I highly recommend for anyone who prioritises story and dialogue above combat. *Knights of the Old Republic* also serves quite well as a first RPG, gently introducing new players to the genre’s conventions and sensibilities. **JMR**

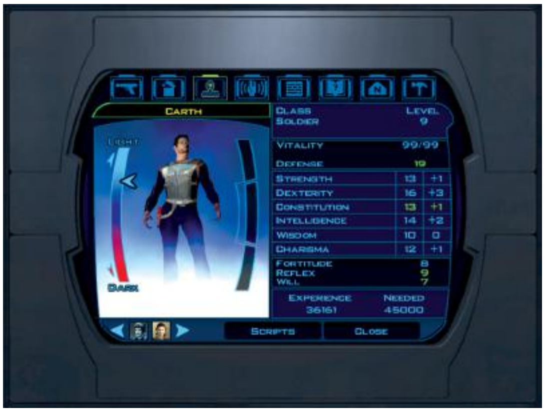
Mods:

Brotherhood of Shadow - Solomon’s Revenge: An amazing fan-made expansion, adds tons of new content, such as items, quests and even a companion.

Yavin IV Planet Mod: Adds a new planet for you to explore, with a new dedicated storyline and quests.

Grif Vindh’s Roleplay Padawan Mod: Allows you to start the game as a Jedi Padawan and skip a good chunk of the game’s long tutorial. Great for a replay.

Lightsaber Forms: Adds the seven lightsaber combat styles to the game, each with unique advantages.



Carth

Class Soldier

Level 9

Vitality 99/99

Defense 19

Strength	13	+1
Dexterity	16	+3
Constitution	13	+1
Intelligence	14	+2
Wisdom	10	0
Charisma	12	+1

Fortitude 8
Reflex 9
Will 7

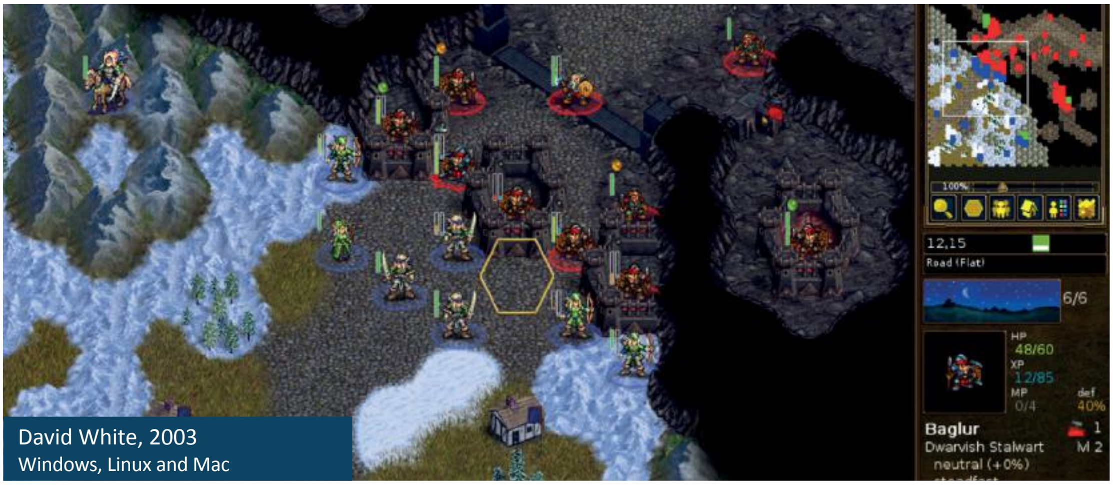
Experience 36161

Needed 45000

The game is based on the *Star Wars Role-playing Game* and uses *D&D*’s d20 system, plus a morality bar

There are three mini-games in *SW:KotOR:* swoop racing, space turret battles and the popular Pazaak card game

The Battle for Wesnoth

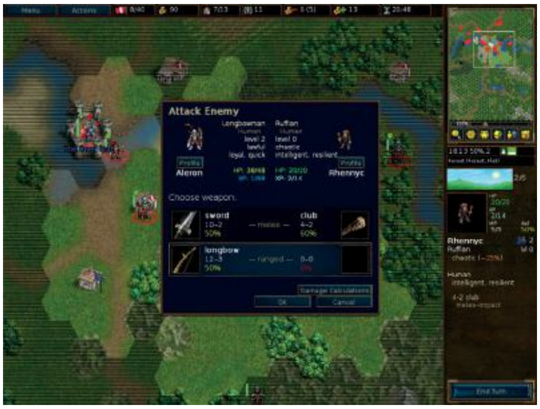


David White, 2003
Windows, Linux and Mac

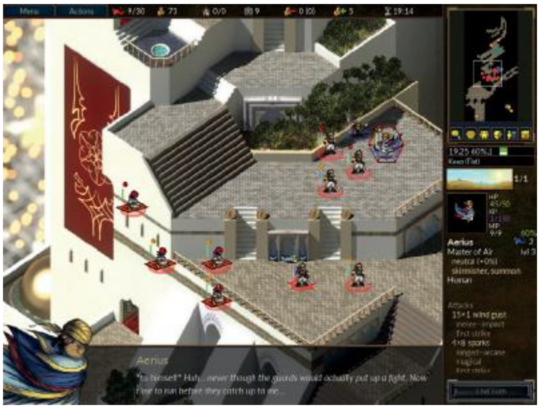
In 2003, David White released the first version of *The Battle for Westnoth*. Inspired by two Japanese titles, *Master of Monsters* and *Warsong*, White's goal was to create a free and open-source turn-based strategy RPG with simple mechanics but deep gameplay.

Since then, the project has received contributions from hundreds of people, improving and adding to all aspects of the game, from the engine, to musical scores, art and several fully-fledged campaigns.

You can read more about *The Battle for Wesnoth* and freely download it at www.wesnoth.org.



Attacks in *Wesnoth* have a controversially high percentage chance of missing, which forces you to adopt tactics constantly but might frustrate some players



Recent fan-made campaigns such as 2018's *To Lands Unknown* greatly expand the game, adding new assets and rules, plus innovative mission types

The secret behind *Wesnoth* is its deceptively simple gameplay. Units move in a hexagonal grid and can only attack adjacent enemies; the game also has just one resource – money, which you gain each turn by controlling locations and use to recruit troops.

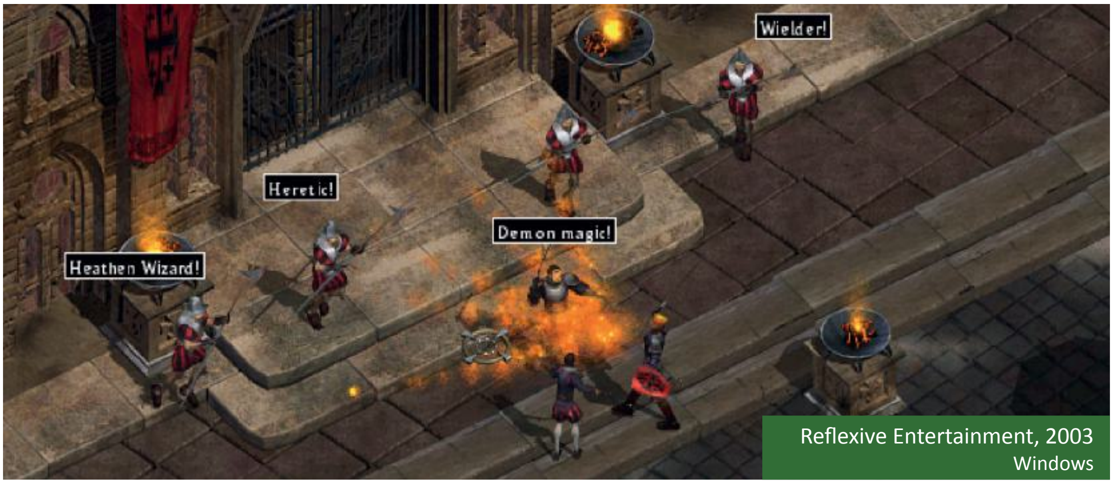
Depth comes from the underlying nuances. There are terrain bonuses, multiple types of attack and damage, unique attributes and alignment effects altered by the time of day. Units level up and can graduate to advanced classes, and the player is generally able to carry these units across multiple scenarios in a campaign – provided they survive. Maps are well-designed and offer surprises, challenging limitations and optional objectives. It's an easy-to-learn game, but very challenging to master.

Wesnoth currently offers 16 "official" campaigns with over 200 scenarios, all set in the same timeline but varying in difficulty and player perspective. For example, in *Heir to the Throne* you take on the role of Konrad, a young prince fighting for his life and the restoration of his kingdom. In the difficult but rewarding *Son of the Black-Eye* campaign you play as Kapou'e, an Orc chieftain. And in *Under the Burning Suns* you travel to Wesnoth's far future and guide your Elvish cohorts to a new home as they struggle to survive the rigours and danger of a hostile land.

The game also has a very large and active multiplayer community and a truly immense collection of user-made content: original campaigns, custom factions, diverse multiplayer maps, etc. All these can be downloaded directly via the game's built-in browser, although some content might require special setups.

For its accessibility, content, price (free!) and support, *The Battle for Wesnoth* is a unique gem in the CRPG crown and a must-have for any fan of turn-based strategy RPGs or strategy titles in general. **ZT**

Lionheart:
Legacy of the Crusader



Reflexive Entertainment, 2003
Windows

Lionheart was the last RPG published by Black Isle Studios, and many CRPG fans also know it as the only other game to be based around *Fallout*'s SPECIAL ruleset, but those are just some of the unusual things about *Lionheart*.

The game is set in an alternate reality where the execution of 3,000 prisoners by King Richard during the Crusades caused the "Disjunction", a dimensional rift that brought magic and demons to our world.

The story itself begins much later, in the 16th century. After being arrested by the Inquisition for possessing magic, the player is attacked by assassins, then saved by none other than Leonardo da Vinci, here an Inventor/Wizard who shares a bond with you.

Indeed, the game used historical figures as NPCs in crazy ways long before *Assassin's Creed* made this popular. Da Vinci is just one of them – Galileo, Shakespeare, Machiavelli, Cervantes, Nostradamus, Joan of Arc and many others make an appearance.

Players are eventually taken to New Barcelona, where they'll meet the four main factions: the Knights Templar, the Inquisition, the Knights of Saladin and the Wielders. As you decide which one to join, their unique quests will allow you to briefly interact with this rather unusual world, exploring its oddities.

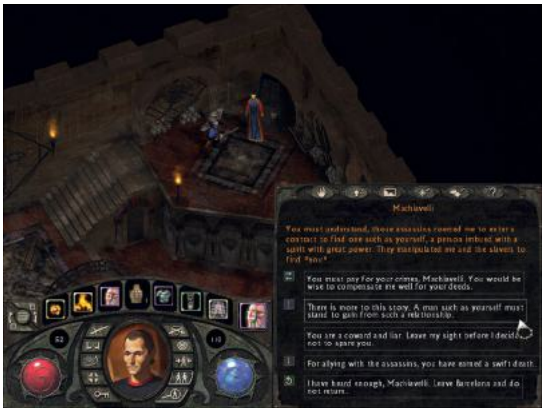
It's after the player leaves New Barcelona that the game takes a turn for the worse. Everything becomes a lot more linear, with the main quest turning into a series of dungeons and repetitive battles.

Combat is real-time, similar to *Diablo*'s, but it's very simplistic and can be a hurdle for those who didn't carefully create their characters. This, combined with poor level and quest design, makes the game's second half a boring path to a rushed conclusion.

So what is good? The soundtrack is great, and the unique and beautiful art adds a lot to the atmosphere. But it's the game world that seals the deal for those who enjoyed at least some portions of the game. Even after the rise of Kickstarter and indie games, *Lionheart* remains one of the wackiest CRPGs I've ever played.

Regardless, *Lionheart* is not a great game. It's not a good one either. It feels like a cancelled title that somehow got released. Those with zero expectations may be able to find some enjoyment, as I did, but it's not a game I'd recommend to anyone. **FAX**

Modders made a widescreen patch for *Lionheart*, and those experiencing graphical glitches can use DxWnd to solve them.


Machiavelli

You must pay for your crimes, Machiavelli. You would be wise to compensate me well for your deeds.

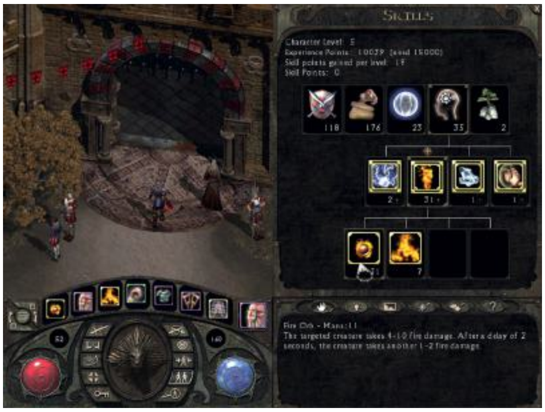
There is more to this story. A man such as yourself must stand to gain from such a relationship.

You are a coward and liar. Leave my sight before I decide not to spare you.

For allying with the assassins, you have earned a swift death.

I have heard enough, Machiavelli. Leave Barcelona and do not return.

The unusual alternate history setting is rich and filled with historical figures; while dialogues have many choices at first, the game later descends into mindless killing

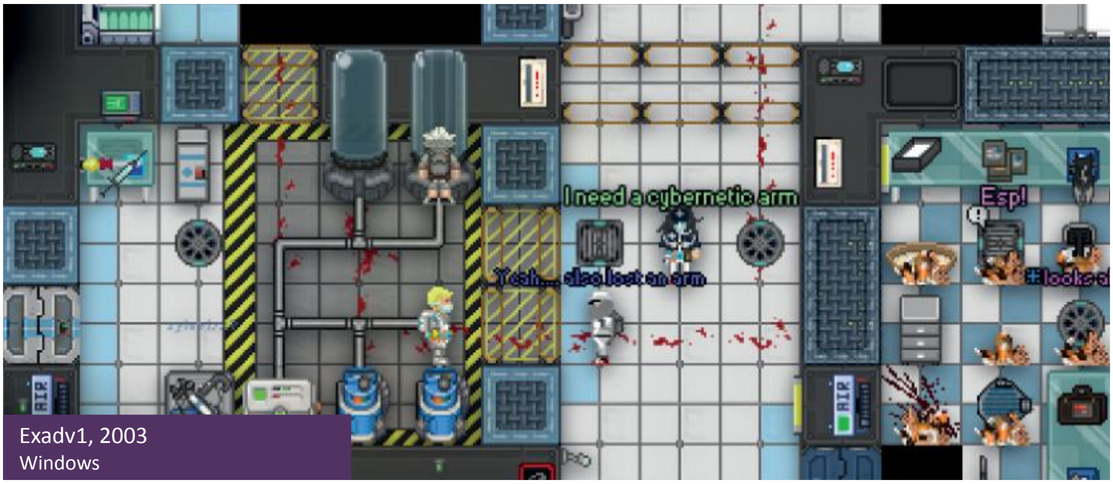


Character Level: 5
Experience Points: 10039 (next 15000)
Skill points gained per level: 17
Skill Points: 0

Fire Orb - Mana: 11
The targeted creature takes 4-10 fire damage. After a delay of 2 seconds, the creature takes another 1-2 fire damage.

The game is based on *Fallout*'s SPECIAL ruleset, with similar stats and perks, but removes most non-combat skills, and adds magic and four races

Space Station 13



Exadv1, 2003
Windows

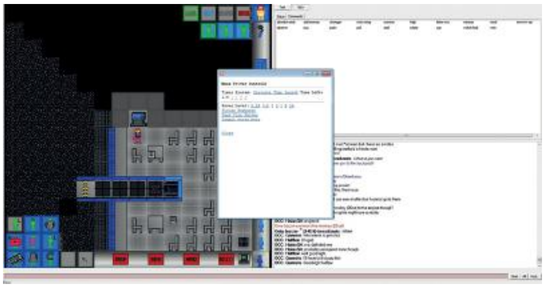
***Space Station 13* is free to play; you just need to download the *BYOND* platform and use it to connect to a server. Please note that each server might use different versions of the game and have entirely new features or rules.**

From the inception of the medium, CRPGs have attempted to replicate the experience of playing a tabletop role-playing game with friends. Programming constraints and the focus on single-player games have made this quite difficult.

As such, *Space Station 13* is a strange anomaly in the world of CRPGs. It's a game that lives and breathes because of its community on every single level. The game is free, exclusively multiplayer and, outside of a rare few exceptions, each server has an open source code base, allowing anyone with skill and time to make their own vision a reality.

SS13 isn't much to look at, with most characters and objects limited to low-resolution sprites. Surprisingly enough, this works to its advantage. Adding new items is relatively quick, and it creates a fairly even level of quality across the board. It also works to the benefit of role-playing, providing the visual reference MUDs can't provide while at the same time avoiding the limitations and development time fully 3D games must work with.

Most *Space Station 13* servers operate around two-hour long rounds. Every player that joins the round will be given their own unique job, whether it's an assistant with nothing to do and everything to break, a lowly janitor who has to clean everyone's messes, or the captain, trying to keep their behaviourally questionable crew from tearing the station apart.



The original 2003 version had simpler graphics and a tiny player base, but already offered complex features such as full simulation of atmospherics (image source: Gannets)

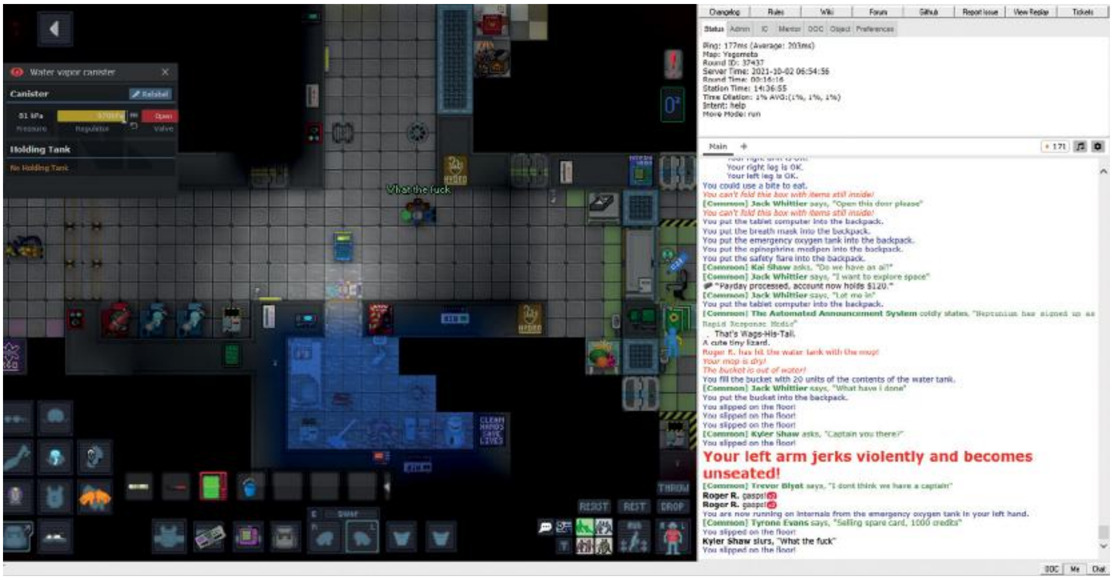
On some servers, there's even a collective goal to work towards, such as building a specific large machine. These efforts are complicated by the inclusion of a variety of antagonists with their own devilish objectives, whether it's a traitor or a shape-shifter sowing paranoia among the crew, a squad of mercenaries sent to wreak havoc, or something else entirely. The game is a fusion of multiple sci-fi works, tropes and references.

Similarities have often been drawn between *Space Station 13* and games like *Among Us* (2018), though the former often sports the much more time consuming two-hour rounds and a larger list of features that involve much more than just a series of mini-games.

Jobs themselves can range from rather simple to needlessly complex. There are some, like the clown (yes, really), which have little in the way of unique mechanics but a variety of gimmicky items and are more focused on role-play. Some, like the bartender, involve just mixing ingredients in a specific way, while others, like the doctor, are a process involving healing multiple types of damage to individual body parts.

It comes as no surprise, then, that some of these more complicated and important roles are locked to newer players. These aren't locked by level or XP points, but simply by the amount of time a player plays on the server. That's not to say the roles unlocked from the start have nothing to do, as the dynamic nature of the game ensures a constant flow of interesting events.

On the most popular version of *SS13*'s code, there are 19 different gases with a variety of effects, most of which must be produced artificially, and an entire job dedicated to experimenting with them. These gases aren't motionless, either. When (not if) the station's hull is breached, all the air in a room will be rapidly sucked out into the cold, hard vacuum of space, dragging along objects and sometimes people with it.



```
Ping: 177ms (Average: 203ms)
Map: Yogsmeta
Round ID: 37437
Server Time: 2021-10-02 06:54:56
Round Time: 00:16:16
Station Time: 14:36:55
Time Dilation: 1% AVG:(1%, 1%, 1%)
Intent: help
Move Mode: run
```

```
    Your right leg is OK.
    Your left leg is OK.
You could use a bite to eat.
You can't fold this box with items still inside!
[Common] Jack Whittier says, "Open this door please"
You can't fold this box with items still inside!
You put the tablet computer into the backpack.
You put the breath mask into the backpack.
You put the emergency oxygen tank into the backpack.
You put the epinephrine medipen into the backpack.
You put the safety flare into the backpack.
[Common] Kai Shaw asks, "Do we have an ai?"
[Common] Jack Whittier says, "I want to explore space"
"Payday processed, account now holds $120."
[Common] Jack Whittier says, "Let me in"
You put the tablet computer into the backpack.
[Common] The Automated Announcement System coldly states, "Neptunius has signed up as Rapid Response Medic"
 . That's Wags-His-Tail.
A cute tiny lizard.
Roger R. has hit the water tank with the mop!
Your mop is dry!
The bucket is out of water!
You fill the bucket with 20 units of the contents of the water tank.
[Common] Jack Whittier says, "What have i done"
You put the bucket into the backpack.
You slipped on the floor!
You slipped on the floor!
You slipped on the floor!
[Common] Kyler Shaw asks, "Captain you there?"
You slipped on the floor!
Your left arm jerks violently and becomes unseated!
[Common] Trevor Blyot says, "I dont think we have a captain"
Roger R. gasps!
Roger R. gasps!
You are now running on internals from the emergency oxygen tank in your left hand.
[Common] Tyrone Evans says, "Selling spare card, 1000 credits"
You slipped on the floor!
Kyler Shaw slurs, "What the fuck"
You slipped on the floor!
```

The main differences between *Space Station 13* and social games like *Among Us or Town of Salem* are the focus on role-playing and the complex simulated systems, which produce moments of emergent gameplay such as a janitor accidentally flooding the station

Just as the station can be destroyed, it can also be repaired, expanded upon, and decorated. Emergent gameplay is on the menu for today, and seeing every single system and player play off of each other creates some truly memorable rounds.

With a dedicated player base and quality world-building, one can have a wholly unique and enjoyable role-playing experience that few other games will ever replicate. Unfortunately, these concepts often fall victim to the very thing they depend upon: people. Low population, overbearing and hostile staff, and more.

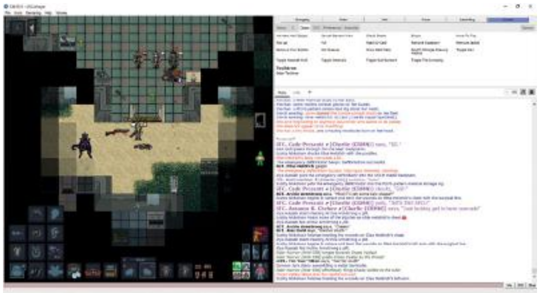
Within the *SS13* community, there is a widespread dislike for slower-paced role-play, with most favouring a fast-paced zone of perpetual action. Also, keep in mind that anyone who knows programming is able to request their own features be added to the game. While this creates some wild ideas, it also leads to bloat and design decisions that go against the concept of a multiplayer RPG: that certain jobs have an optimal path to follow and players will often be looked down upon for experimenting and seeing how things interact.

Just like *Among Us* and many other games, *SS13* didn't truly take off until long after its release. Initially made public in 2003, it had few players even for the game's low standards. The eventual release of the source code may have been what saved it from extinction.

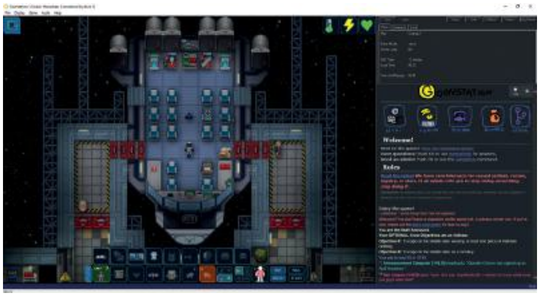
Many online communities took notice and started making their own servers with their own features and improved sprite work, and the player base swelled. A few servers even started radically altering the game, whether by implementing ship-to-ship combat, asymmetrical PVP, or even a harsh wasteland like that of *Fallout*. One server even attempts to return to a more traditional view of CRPGs via the implementation of stats, skills and many other changes.

Given the examples above, it's clear that an experimental spirit continues to this very day: the spirit of a game defined by its potential for the community to improve upon its systems. It's that potential that keeps people coming back over many years, eager to give their ideas form, be it a single character or a brand new server. **JDN**

You can check the *SS13* reddit for a list of all servers with a description of their goals, how much role-playing they expect of you and their "Shenanigans Tolerance" level.



The Colonial Marines servers change the game so one team plays as marines and the other as xenomorphs from the *Alien* movies



The Goonstation servers use their own reworked pixel art, as well as several other updates to the UI and visuals

TRON 2.0

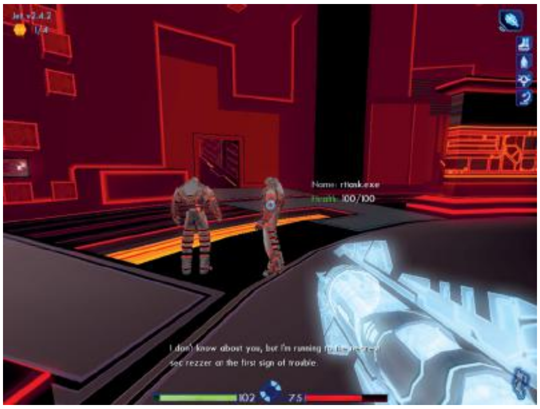
Monolith Productions, 2003
Windows, Mac and Xbox

***TRON 2.0* was intended as the official sequel to the original *TRON*. However, Disney later released the *TRON Legacy* film sequel and tie-in *TRON Evolution* game, declaring *TRON 2.0* to now be an alternate-universe story.**

TRON is a film that – despite being released in the summer of 1982, during a time crowded by other memorable science-fiction films and only being a moderate success – has endured for decades, inspiring many to become programmers, 3D visual artists and, of course, game designers. It was no surprise, then, when Disney used the 20th Anniversary DVD release of *TRON* to tease a follow-up to the movie – this time as a video game.

TRON 2.0 places you in the role of Jethro "Jet" Bradley, son of Alan Bradley from the original movie. Like Kevin Flynn, Jet is digitised by a laser and sent into the electronic world, where he must learn to survive this new environment while helping Ma3a, the program responsible for digitising him.

Developed by the FPS veterans at Monolith (*Blood, No One Lives Forever, F.E.A.R.*) most of the game plays as an FPS, with the player using the iconic Identity Disk and a variety of imaginative analogues to the standard weaponry – shotgun, sniper rifle, grenade launcher, sub-machine gun, etc. – all based on geometric primitives (Disk, Rod, Ball, Mesh).



I don't know about you, but I'm running [illegible]
sec rezzer at the first sign of trouble.

Apart from the Identity Disk, all weapons use energy to shoot, requiring some extra tactics and thought when using them

The Identity Disk stands out among the other weapons – it ricochets, can block enemies' discs and the player is able to finely control it with the mouse, guiding its launch and return paths, and how quickly it returns. This allows for many satisfying trick shots.

The other defining feature of *TRON 2.0* is the character upgrade system. It introduces a role-playing element, and often has fans referring to the game as a "*Deus Ex*-lite". As you play, you'll come across subroutines – the *TRON 2.0* version of upgrades – that can be placed in Jet's "memory block" slots.

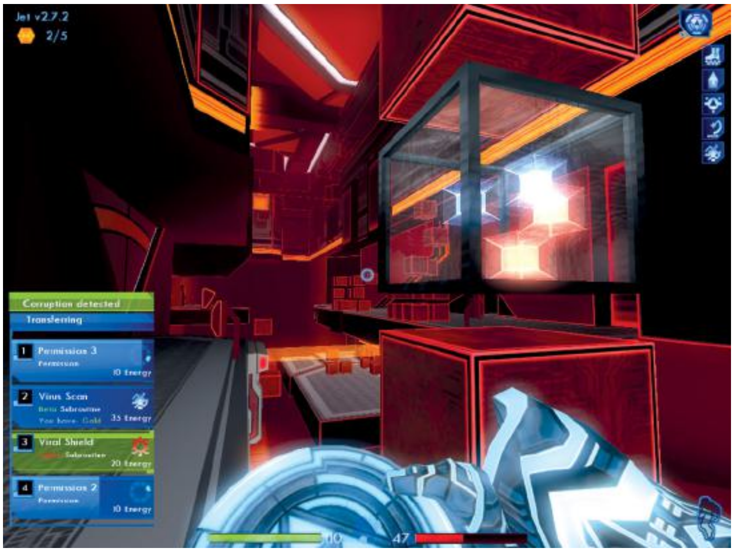
These subroutines range from protective armour to new weapons, weapon modifiers (throw multiple discs, drain health, deal poison damage, etc.) or even utility skills (jump higher, walk silently, scan enemies, etc.). Each requires a set number of memory slots, but can be upgraded (from Alpha to Beta to Gold), becoming more efficient and smaller in size.

Jet's memory block slots constantly reconfigure themselves in arrangement and capacity as he travels through various systems, forcing players to strategize and adapt their skills as they play. New subroutines can be incompatible, empty blocks can become corrupt and there's always the danger of a virus attacking them. To solve this, you can port, defrag and disinfect the subroutines – all which takes time and can be decisive during a firefight.

As Jet completes objectives, he continually earns build points (the game's version of XP). At every milestone of 100 build points earned, Jet gains a version number and the player can improve his performance: increasing his health, energy, weapon efficiency, processor (port, disinfect, defrag speed) and transfer rate – the speed at which he downloads permissions (keys), e-mails (that flesh out the story), subroutines, health and energy from various sources.

“Without a doubt, the artists and level designers on the *TRON 2.0* team successfully captured the essence of *TRON*. Not only do the characters and environments look like those found in the movie, but in some cases surpass them. The art direction of *TRON 2.0* really stands out as one of the primary attributes of the game, especially with the recent trend toward hyper-realistic military games. *TRON 2.0* is a fresh alternative.”

– Frank Rooke,
TRON 2.0*’s lead game designer*


Jet v2.7.2
2/5
Corruption detected
Transferring
1 Permission 3
10 Energy
2 Virus Scan
35 Energy
3 Viral Shield
20 Energy
4 Permission 2
10 Energy
47

Everything in *TRON 2.0* is well-tied to the theme. Instead of looting items, you download them from archive bins at the cost of energy; some of those can even contain a virus

The continuous FPS action is occasionally broken up by Light Cycle races that very closely emulate the ones seen in the *TRON* movies. But it introduces power-ups that can be picked up by the player on the grid, adding new elements of strategy and luck in helping to defeat AI Light Cycle opponents.

The environments brilliantly walk the fine line between paying homage to classic *TRON*, while at the same time updating them with a richer, more detailed look. Monolith’s pioneering and extensive use of Bloom here is more than just a gimmick, reproducing the neon glow the film is known for. Two conceptual artists from the original *TRON* movie, Richard Taylor and Syd Mead, were consulted; and the movie’s director, Steven Lisberger, had an (uncredited) involvement in the creation of the game’s story.

The excellent soundtrack is also quite faithful, with themes that use the work of *TRON*’s original composer, Wendy Carlos, as a motif.

So if you’re looking for a title that’s not quite an FPS, not quite an RPG – and a love letter to the original *TRON* in every way – give *TRON 2.0* a try. Littered with computer jargon, clever puns and direct references to the film, it’s a fondly remembered favourite with most fans. Furthermore, thanks to its setting and art style, it hasn’t aged or become dated in the same way many other titles do. **RTR**

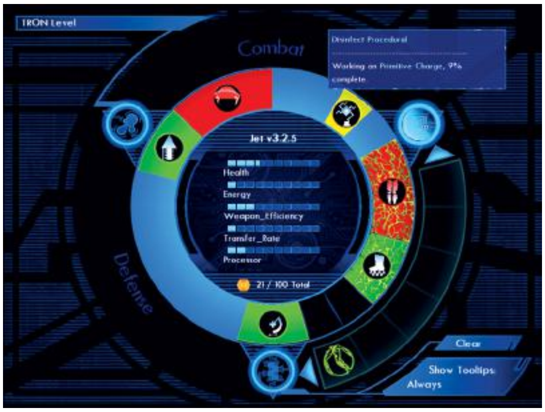
Mods:

The site www.ldso.net hosts a community forum, and its team creates many of the mods for *TRON 2.0* – both for Steam and the original retail release.

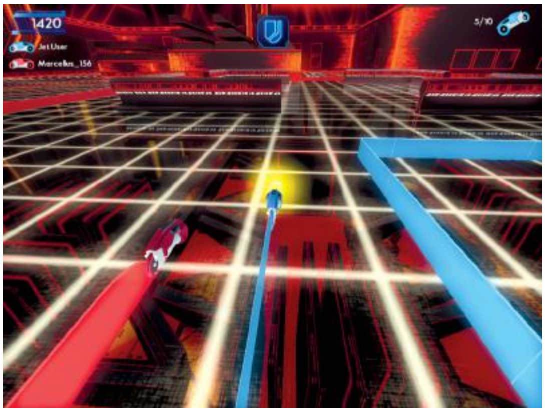
Killer App Mod: Adds widescreen resolutions, restores the broken online multiplayer, and many other features, including content that was exclusive to the Xbox.

User Error: A fan-made series of original single-player missions with new stories and protagonists.

An expansion for *TRON 2.0* and a *TRON 3.0* game were planned, but later cancelled in favour of the *TRON Legacy* movie and its tie-in game.


TRON Level
Combat
Defense
Jet v3.2.5
Health
Energy
Weapon_Efficiency
Transfer_Rate
Processor
21 / 100 Total
Clear
Show Tooltips
Always

The System Memory screen, where subroutines are managed and your stats are increased


1420
JetUser
Marcelus_156
5/10

Light Cycle races are part of the campaign, but can also be played in tournaments with customisable rules

SpellForce:
The Order of Dawn

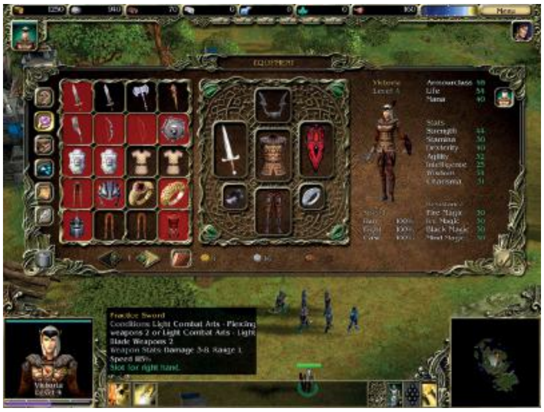
Phenomic, 2003
Windows

***SpellForce* can be quite slow, but the game has a console command that allows you to speed everything up.**

SpellForce as a series is the most famous example of the ill-fated RTS/RPG “blenders” trying unsuccessfully to mix genres. The game features two distinct layers that it attempts to somehow amalgamate into a coherent whole. The first, infinitely stronger one is the RPG part, featuring an extensive classless character system that facilitates experimentation and unique build concepts. The second is the RTS portion: very poorly realised and more notable for its ambition than anything else.

Nevertheless, there is an undeniable charm to *SpellForce 1*, coming from the diversity created by these two elements and the persistent world you can freely move through. The RPG side offers a positively delightful suite of options, including two-handed weapons and heavy armour, light armaments, and elemental magics, necromancy and even mind magic.

You can combine any of these without restriction, but they are far from balanced. Contrary to what usually happens in RPGs, martial-focused characters come out on top here because mages suffer from mana and sustainability issues.



The game offers a wide variety of equipment and spells for your main character, but their strict level and stats restrictions mean you’ll have to grind if you want to use the most powerful ones

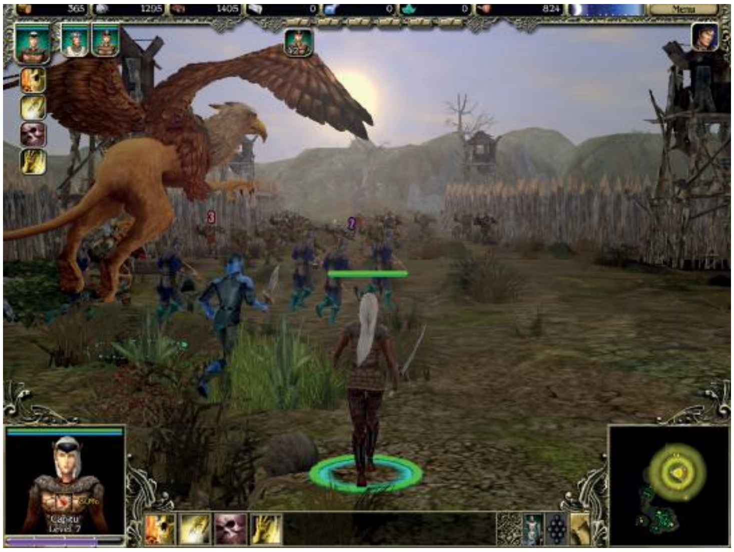
In order to somewhat offset these balance problems, you have semi-temporary party members who can fulfil whatever role you need them to, depending on their own skill sets. Items naturally complement the character building and are a major contributor to making exploration a joy and, surprisingly, a big selling point. The maps are varied and well-designed, some of them humongous (only some of the time to their detriment). The RPG part is, in other words, quite excellent and can easily muscle out more prominent RPGs in a lot of departments.

All of this comes in a very rich setting that effectively creates a tense environment where conflict could and is brewing at every corner. The world of Eo has already borne witness to an all-encompassing (magical) war of ruling mage-lords and has been torn into islands connected by portals.

You play as a certain lore-dependent type of human tasked with stopping one of these mage-lords who has created an army of iron constructs. Along the way, you come across and lead all the various races inhabiting Eo – humans, elves, dwarves, orcs, trolls and dark elves. The way you command your forces comes with very ethically murky implications; it’s a shame these themes aren’t explored in-game because they are the most interesting part of the narrative.

The first expansion, *The Breath of Winter*, adds a campaign entirely unrelated to the base game’s, which revolves around saving an elf queen and calming a dragon, all the while setting up the basis for the second expansion, *Shadow of the Phoenix*, through an elaborate side-quest. *SotP* deals with another renegade mage-lord, culminating in a fight against a demi-god. You can import your protagonist from either the base game or from *BoW* into *SotP* and they’ll have slightly different stories and even different starting maps.

> "I had a bit of a feeling that real-time strategy games had gotten into a kind of dead end. More units or upgrades and better graphics just don't make the cut to create the next generation. I was especially thinking about how we could drag the player more into the action of the game and how we could avoid the effect that the player needs to start 'from scratch' each mission. That was the basic idea for *SpellForce*."
>
> *– Volker Wertich,*
> SpellForce*'s Project Leader*
> *and Phenomic's founder*



Your hero can be directly controlled in third-person mode using WASD, or like other units in a mouse-driven top-down view, as in a traditional RTS game

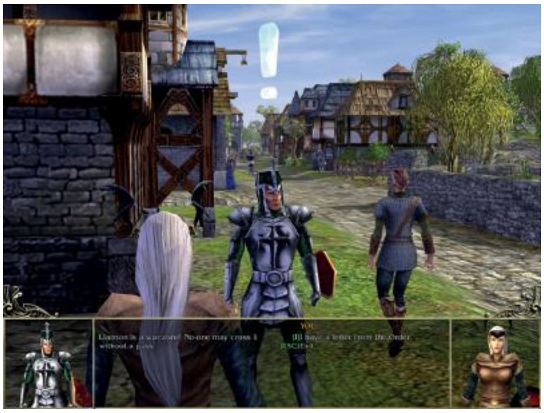
The shadow of the RTS layer looms over all campaigns, however, and is, for better or worse, the main reason why this series is successful and still getting entries. As mentioned previously, there are six main races in the game and you get to control them all. They are technically distinct enough to make an impression, but the overall mechanics of base building and army management are extremely bare-bones at best and outright annoying and tedious at worst.

The developers tried to provide each race with a lot of units, but since even AAA RTS releases at that time managed 3–4 distinct factions at most, each race in *SpellForce* consists of one unique 3D model that gets re-textured multiple times. Some units have abilities (that you can't control) and that's where the true variety comes from, but the only thing you'll be doing during the RTS sections is very slowly amassing the biggest possible deathball of 1–2 types of unit and praying you've made it big enough to trample the opposition.

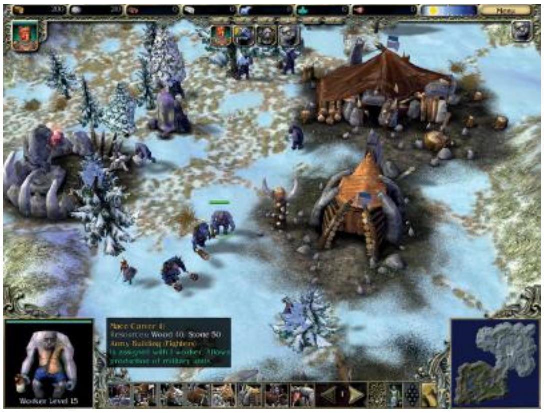
Said opposition is endlessly produced from spawn points around the map, which can create a situation in which you have enough units to keep enemies at bay, but not enough to make any progress. However, extra enemies only begin spawning once you activate the monuments from which you train workers and military units. This makes the RTS sections mercifully optional in the majority of the maps, as it's easier to complete them if you don't engage with base building. Still, you might want to dabble in it, because grinding spawn points is required to keep up with level restrictions.

Despite these negative aspects, *SpellForce 1* is worth playing. There is a certain addictive masochistic pleasure in completing one more map to see what happens and where you go next. Since this game spawned two sequels and countless expansions, it seems I'm not the only one having this experience. Just know what you are getting into and you'll probably end up enjoying it. **LAC**

Several mods were made for the game, such as *SpellForce Reimagined,* which expands and rebalances the game, and *SpellForce Revisited,* which makes it more challenging for returning players.

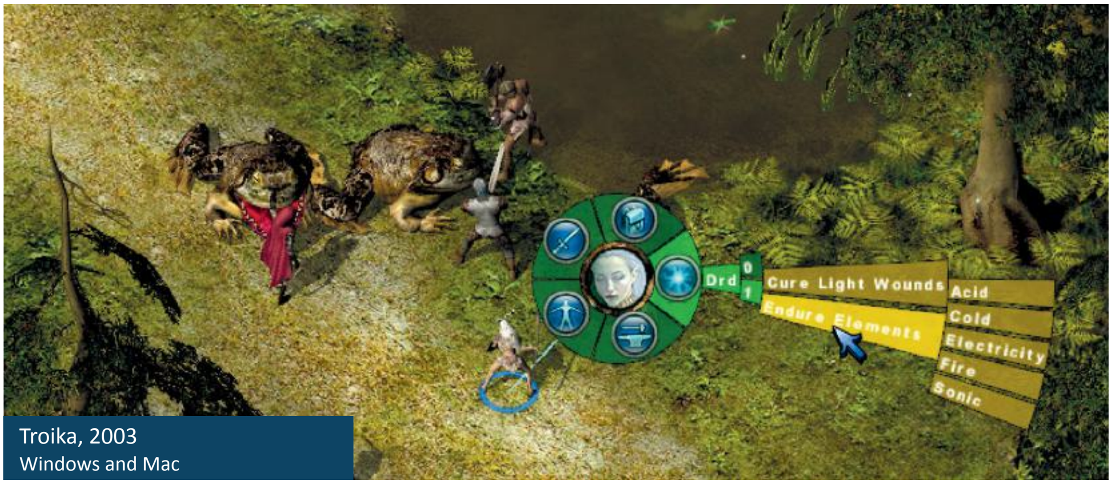


The game is made of huge, interconnected maps that mix typical RTS resources with towns, NPCs and side-quests



New structures and unit types aren't researched; they're acquired from quests or merchants and last the entire game

Temple of Elemental Evil



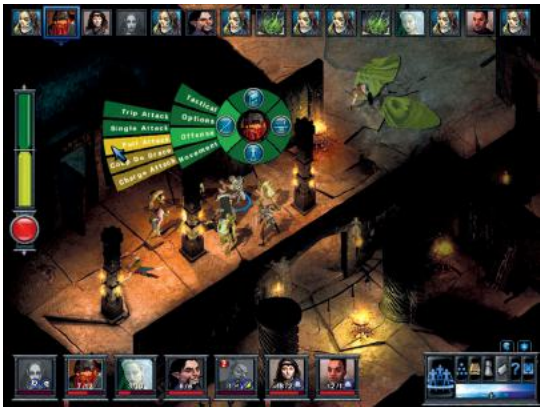
Troika, 2003
Windows and Mac

The Temple of Elemental Evil (a.k.a. *ToEE*) is based on its namesake classic pen-and-paper module – written back in 1985 by Gary Gygax and Frank Mentzer for the first edition of *Dungeons & Dragons* – now translated to the 3.5E *D&D* system. Aside from that, you can say one thing about Troika: they did their darnedest to stay faithful to both the pen-and-paper module and the tactical turn-based *D&D* system – for better and worse.

If there's one thing *ToEE* excels at, it's the combat system – they nailed it almost perfectly. You get to roll up your party, and deck them out with high-fidelity renditions of the system's basic classes – 11 in total.

Couple that with the myriad feats available to customise characters and half the fun of the game becomes developing the members of your band of adventurers: maybe create a Druid who specialises in augmented summoning; an agile trip-focused Fighter; a near-invisible Rogue archer who scouts ahead and lands devastating sneak attacks while cloaked; or perhaps an Evocation specialist Wizard (which spell schools should I sacrifice? Decisions, decisions).

Troika proposed a sequel to *ToEE* based on the *Queen of the Spiders* super module, as well as licensing the game's engine to Obsidian so they could create *Baldur's Gate III*. Sadly, Atari never followed up on any of these proposals.



From its gridless movement to the myriad of combat manoeuvres available, *ToEE* offers plenty of tactical choices

Once cast into the game itself, you are provided with a wide variety of tactical manoeuvres: you can use your own initiative to tailor your party's attack sequence, so you can milk that extra Attack of Opportunity. Efficiently position characters to obtain flanking bonuses (or negate the AI's). Ready an action vs. approach as you anticipate and interrupt an oncoming attack from a particular vector (before they get to your squishy Wizard). Various levers and pulleys help you shift focus to something at the expense of another – do I use Charge Attack to swiftly engage in melee, at the expense of an Armour Class penalty in that round? Or do I hold the line and Fight Defensively, boosting my AC at the expense of my to-hit chance?

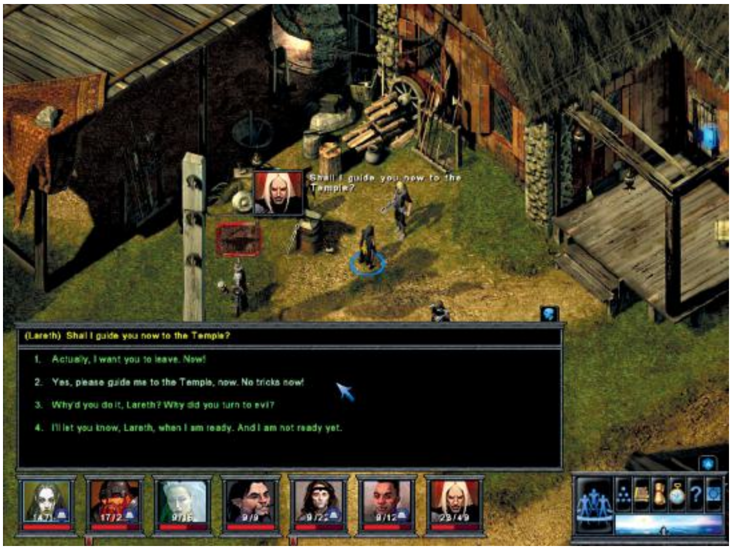
On top of that, you have the game's vast library of spells to complement your strategies: Enlarge Person on that fighter so the chances of tripping opponents become more favourable, not to mention that increased reach which affords you those sweet extra attacks from that Cleave feat. And the havoc you can wreak with those overpowered charm spells! YES!

Unfortunately, *ToEE* is also a very flawed game. For one, it was very buggy on release – it took two official patches and years' worth of fan-made patches to fix up and polish the game. The biggest disappointment, however, is in the role-playing department.

Troika had, up until that point, a reputation for brilliant RPG worlds: vast, open, fleshed-out, rife with plots and subplots and well-thought-out interactions with the inhabitants, history and lore. These were the guys who brought us *Arcanum* and *Fallout*, after all!

As it turned out, *ToEE* had very little of that, and the threadbare story it did have pretty much dissolved at the mid-game stage, when you were left with not much to go on beyond, "There's this Temple here, uh, kill it or something."

> "When the opportunity to do *D&D* 3E came up, I sat down with my entire collection (100+) of modules and tried to decide which one I wanted to do. The module had to be one I enjoyed playing (of course), but it also had to be big enough to feel epic. Many of the modules that fit the bill were Greyhawk modules, which I had grown up playing with *AD&D*."
>
> *– Tim Cain,*
> ToEE*'s lead designer*


Shall I guide you now to the Temple?

(Lareth) Shall I guide you now to the Temple?

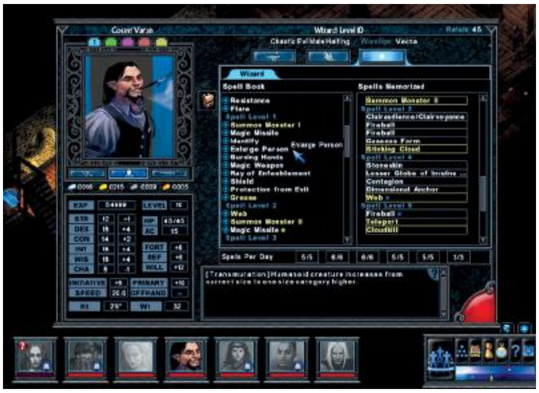
1. Actually, I want you to leave. Now!
2. Yes, please guide me to the Temple, now. No tricks now!
3. Why'd you do it, Lareth? Why did you turn to evil?
4. I'll let you know, Lareth, when I am ready. And I am not ready yet.

The village of Hommlet is huge, and some NPCs have interesting quests and stories, but the focus of the game is the tactical combat

To be fair, *ToEE* can be credited for being very free-form – you can ally with various factions, backstab them, or just skip them entirely. It also made a valiant effort at establishing party motivation via short introductory vignettes/alignment-based plots, and making companion NPCs have agendas of their own. It just fails at properly executing these, and this is one area that mods couldn't save.

There is one other major strength to *ToEE* that no review should leave out – it's freaking gorgeous! The 3D character models over beautiful pre-rendered 2D backgrounds approach proved itself back in 2003, and it's no wonder it has made a comeback in recent Kickstarter RPGs, such as *Pillars of Eternity*.

Despite its botched release, *ToEE* remains dear to many, having also been cited as highly influential by developers like Larian Studios. Even now, more than a decade after its release, fans continue hammering away at it, creating and polishing mods.


D&D's magic system is fully employed, with hundreds of spells and even meta-magic feats like the Empower Spell

ToEE is a game you would keep coming back to, in no small part due to the game's dedicated modders, but honestly also because there weren't many games of its kind being released for a long period of time.

Overall, it's great if you're looking for a tactical combat romp, but if you're after a fully-fledged RPG experience, you may want to look elsewhere. **SA**

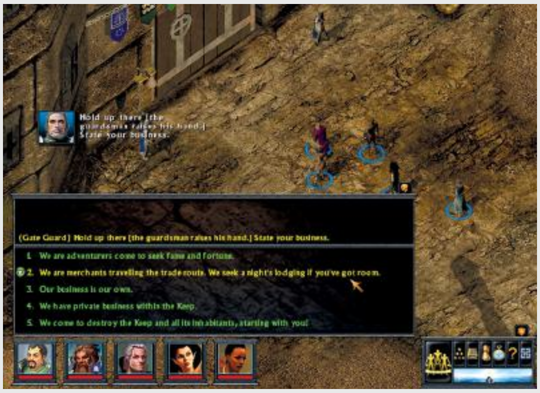
***ToEE* didn't get official modding tools, but the game's editor was accidentally released in the Polish version of the game.**

Mods:

Circle of Eight Mod Pack: This huge mod pack includes countless bugfixes and improvements, plus a great deal of extra optional content, including higher character levels and content. Don't play without this.

Temple Plus: This project aims to expand the game's engine, allowing for further modification and bug fixing.

Keep at the Borderlands: A total conversion mod based on another of Gary Gygax's classic *D&D* modules. It has a heavier focus on the role-playing aspect, with elaborate quests and many factions to deal with.

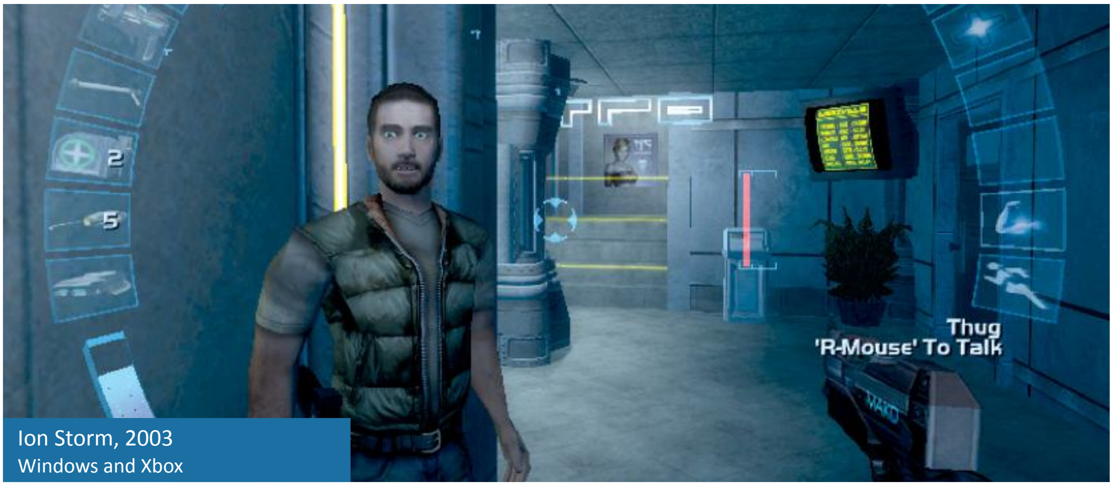

Hold up there [the guardsman raises his hand.] State your business.

(Gate Guard) Hold up there [the guardsman raises his hand.] State your business.

1. We are adventurers come to seek fame and fortune.
2. We are merchants travelling the trade route. We seek a night's lodging if you've got room.
3. Our business is our own.
4. We have private business within the Keep.
5. We come to destroy the Keep and all its inhabitants, starting with you!

The *Keep at the Borderlands* mod adds many dialogue checks and choices to *ToEE*'s combat-heavy gameplay

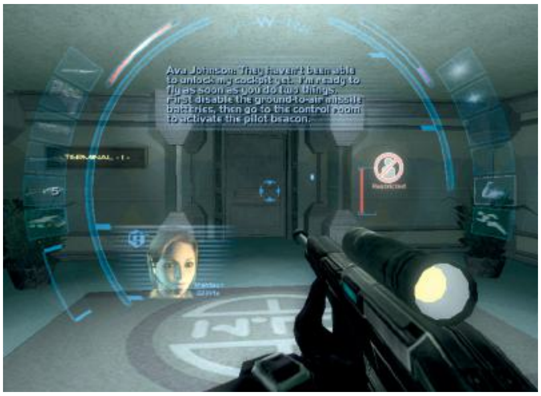
Deus Ex: Invisible War



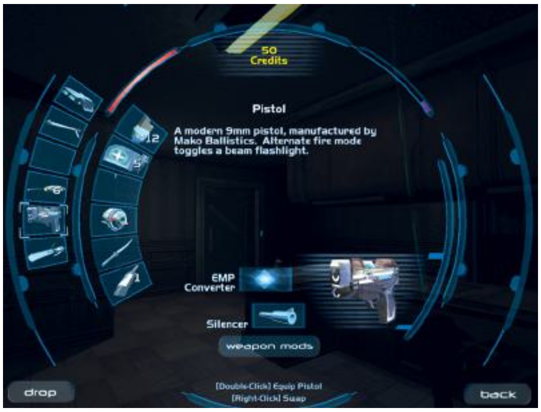
Ion Storm, 2003
Windows and Xbox

After the golden era that was the late ’90s and early 2000s, the mid-2000s were a troubled time, especially for old-school CRPG fans. It was a period tainted by the “death of PCs”, the closing of beloved studios and a shift towards multi-platform releases, with console-oriented design trends taking over. While these changes are noticeable in several games, nowhere are they more notable and frustrating than in the infamous *Deus Ex: Invisible War*.

Those who wish to play *DE:IW* can edit the game files to get widescreen resolutions and a higher field of view. We also recommend John P’s *Unified Texture* mod.


Ava Johnson: They haven't been able to unlock my cockpit yet. I'm ready to fly as soon as you do two things. First disable the ground-to-air missile batteries, then go to the control room to activate the pilot beacon.

Your missions are delivered directly to your screen; no matter who you side with, every faction will be constantly begging for favours



A modern 9mm pistol, manufactured by Mako Ballistics. Alternate fire mode toggles a beam flashlight.

Invisible War introduced a shared ammo system, whereby all guns use the same universal ammo, but in different amounts

Set 20 years after *Deus Ex,* you play as Alex D. (who can be a man or a woman), an augmented agent who escapes their training facility to investigate a terrorist attack that destroyed Chicago.

Creating a sequel to one of the best games of all time would be difficult in any scenario, but Ion Storm’s task was made even harder by aiming for a multi-platform release. The Xbox couldn’t handle the large areas of the original game, so they had to scale everything down.

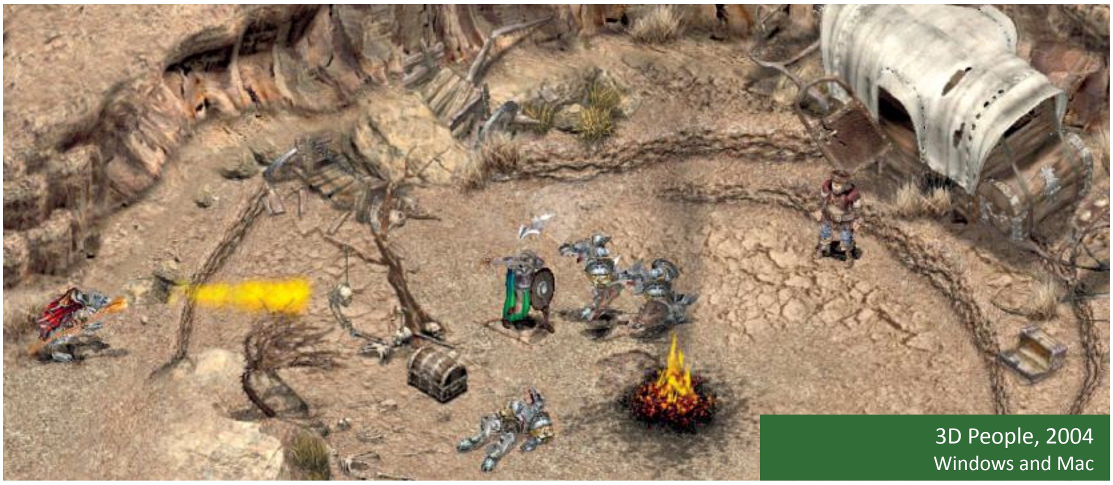
Replacing the large, open locations with small areas interrupted by constant loading screens wasn’t just a downgrade – it killed exploration and made multiple routes feel like pointless cosmetic choices. With no room for elaborate alternative paths, it all boils down to “pick locked door” or “go into air vent nearby”.

A lot of streamlining was done as well – items, inventory and bio-mods were drastically reduced, while the RPG-like skills were removed altogether.

Game director Harvey Smith later summed it up best by saying they tried to fix what people didn’t like in *Deus Ex* and forgot to focus on what they did like. A good example is the plot. The original game was elaborate and full of twists, although very linear. *Invisible War* offers two competing factions and lets players pick sides, but puts “absolute freedom” in front of long term consequences. So if you betray a faction, it will send armed goons after you. Once you dispatch them, the faction goes, “Hope you learned your lesson, don’t betray us anymore, please do this new quest.”

Despite all its limitations, there is still a good game underneath *Deus Ex: Invisible War.* It was well-received as an ambitious western-style RPG for the original Xbox – a novelty at the time. But for fans of the original *Deus Ex*, it became a poster child for the compromises that classic PC games suffered with the transition into multi-platform releases. **FE**

Kult:
Heretic Kingdoms


3D People, 2004
Windows and Mac

Kult: Heretic Kingdoms* (a.k.a. *Heretic Kingdoms: The Inquisition* in the US) began with 3D People developing an isometric action RPG. To stand out among the many "*Diablo*-clones" of the early 2000s, they partnered with International Hobo, a game writing and design consultancy company.

This little backstory seems key to understanding why *Kult* feels like two different games inside one.

Clearly influenced by Michael Moorcock, it tells of a world where an ancient hero killed God. His blade became infused with god-like powers, and later one of his descendants used it to conquer the land, imposing a brutal theocracy. He was eventually defeated, and to stop another theocrat from rising, the sword was hidden and an Inquisition was formed, seeking to destroy all religions that might grow to oppress humanity.

You play as Alita, an apprentice to the High Inquisitor – but also a descendant of the ancient hero's bloodline. During your adventures you'll learn more about these past events, of your own order and of those seeking to resurrect God, in a morally ambiguous tale with multiple endings (based on a last-minute choice).

Kult also has great world-building, with all quests and NPCs having their own reasonable motivations. You'll hear about refugees from neighbouring countries, tribal caste systems, prostitutes fleeing slavery, etc.

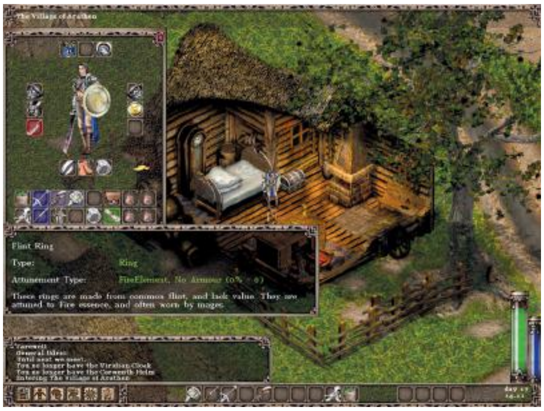
What dooms *Kult* is that all this happens inside an underwhelming action RPG. Combat is slow, tedious and extremely unbalanced (several skills are broken), map design is poor and monsters barely have any tactics or abilities – even the bosses just run at you.

The skill system is similar to those in some JRPGs, where each equipment piece can teach a new skill if you use it enough. But most skills are dull passive bonuses and the few magic spells are all automatically cast, so you'll just right-click on enemies the whole game.

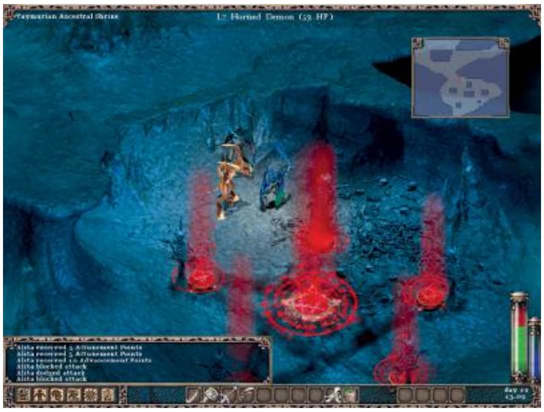
Kult is a game in conflict with itself – at one point you'll be playing a low budget *Diablo*-clone; at another you'll be exploring a large city full of NPCs, uncovering secrets of the past and taking sides in a faction war between thieves, with barely any killing involved.

The good news is that *Kult* is short (6–8 hours), and doesn't overstay its welcome. As such, it's worth giving it a chance – you'll likely enjoy most of its good parts before tiring of the bad ones. **FE**

***Kult* got an unexpected sequel in 2014 with *Shadows: Heretic Kingdoms*, a party-based action RPG set in the same world. It was then expanded and re-released as *Shadows: Awakening* in 2018.**

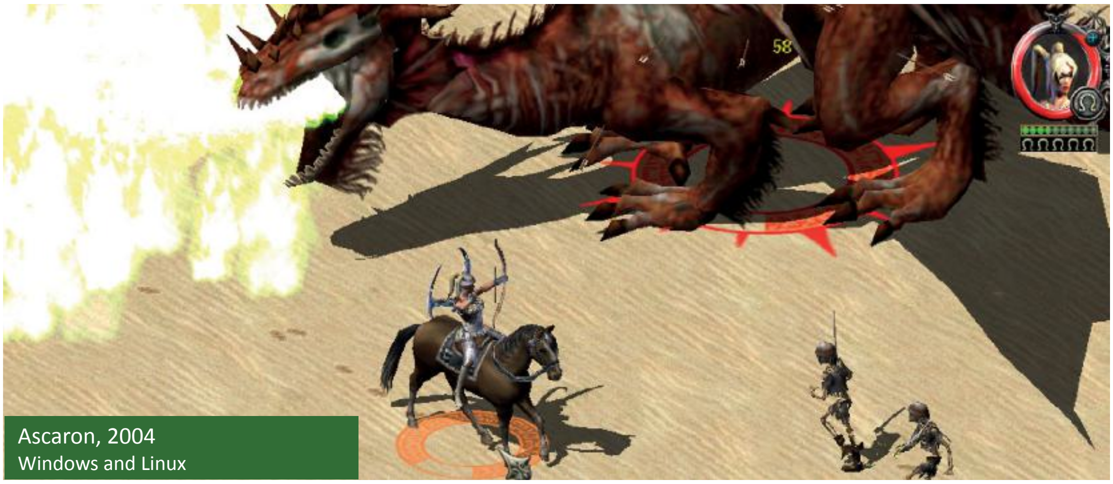

Flint Ring
Type: Ring
Attunement Type: FireElement, No Armour (0% : 0)
These rings are made from common flint, and lack value. They are attuned to Fire essence, and often worn by mages.

You learn new skills from equipped gear, but there might be special requirements, such as using a fire-based weapon and no armour



Your character can freely shift into a shadow version of the current area, meeting ghosts and battling demons for XP and skill bonuses

Sacred

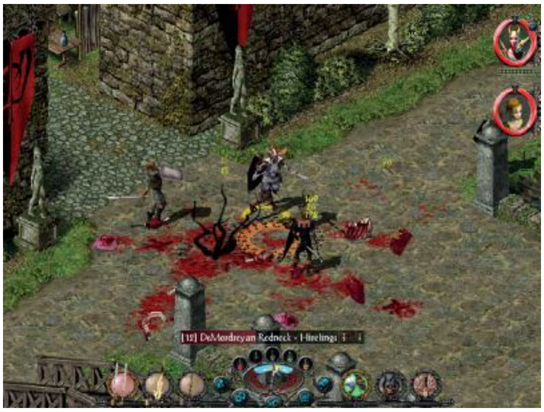

Ascaron, 2004
Windows and Linux

***Sacred 2* is famous for featuring the heavy metal band *Blind Guardian*. They provided the game's main theme, Sacred Worlds, and upon completing certain quests you can watch them perform it in-game.**

In the early 2000s, a small German company named Ikarion was developing *Armalion,* an action RPG based on the highly popular German tabletop RPG *The Dark Eye (Das Schwarze Auge).* The company eventually went bankrupt, but the unfinished game was bought by Ascaron, known for its soccer management series *Anstoss*. Dropping the *Dark Eye* licence, Ascaron's subsidiary Studio II continued developing the game and published it in 2004 as *Sacred*.

The game is unmistakably based on *Diablo II.* It's an isometric action RPG with six heroes: Battle Mage, Dark Elf, Gladiator, Seraphim, Vampiress and Wood Elf (plus Daemon and Dwarf in the expansion). They learn and improve passive skills upon levelling up, but each hero's unique powers are taught and upgraded by runes. Instead of mana, these powers are all cooldown-based, and can be connected to form combos.

There's also multiplayer (though you'll need to use Hamachi now), five difficulty modes and, of course, tons of loot to collect – normal, magical, rare, uniques and item sets. This may sound like a generic *Diablo* clone, but the charm of *Sacred* lies in the details.


Some characters have very unusual abilities: the Dwarf is the only one who can use guns; the Vampiress has two forms; the Daemon can fly over obstacles, and so on

Sacred features an extensive open-world map, with most of it being freely accessible from the start. It's packed full of side-quests, towns, NPCs, caves, dungeons and secrets to uncover. To explore this vast world, you can buy horses and actually fight while riding them – they decrease your attack speed, but offer stat bonus and are great for ranged characters.

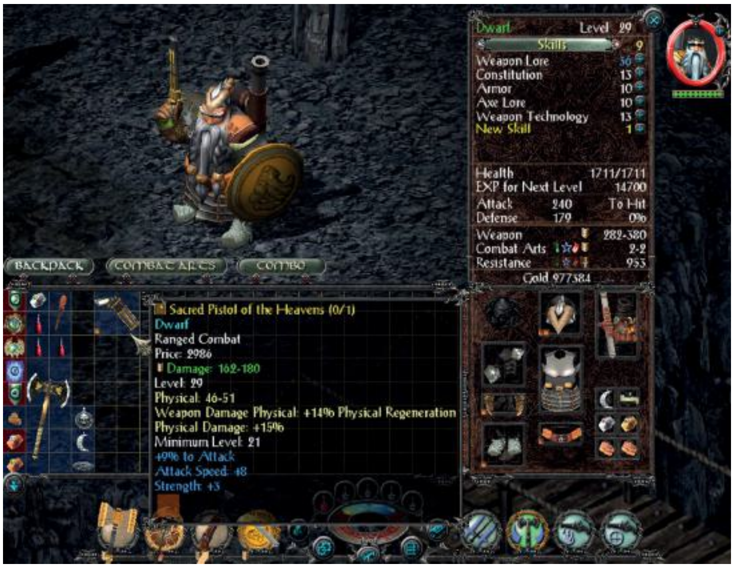
The graphics blends pre-rendered backgrounds with fully 3D characters, and, while they may look somewhat dated and pixelated up close, the 3D models have great animations and enemies all wear diverse weapons and gear, besides the usual palette-swapping.

This attention to details is constant, and the devs also included many Easter eggs and references, as well as plenty of humour. You'll hear amusing taunts from monsters, read funny tombstones, meet developers and beta testers, drag a runaway groom back to the church, wield lightsabers and even visit a recreation of *Diablo*'s Tristram. With all that, the shortcomings of its bland story are almost forgotten. You'll find yourself excusing "just one more quest" or "just one more level-up", while addictively searching for more treasure.

Despite a rather buggy initial release, *Sacred* was a huge hit, selling over two million copies worldwide. This success rescued Ascaron's finances and funded the *Underworld* expansion, which adds two heroes and many areas, items and enemies. Eventually, the sequel arrived in *Sacred 2: Fallen Angel* (2008).

The sequel uses fully 3D graphics, and while the core gameplay was carefully maintained, there are some big changes. Of *Sacred*'s classes, only the iconic Seraphim was kept – the other six classes are all new, such as the cybernetic Guardian, or the dark Inquisitor. Two campaigns are now available, Light and Shadow, which change your role in the game – either as saviour of the land or as the source of its problems.

> “In retrospect, it turned out that the team that created *Sacred 1* and *Sacred 2* was some sort of ‘one in a million’. It is very rare that so many different people are forming a team that’s so balanced and full of positive energy. Chaotic creativity against analytical thinking, boldness of the rookies against coolness of seasoned developers, everything in this team seemed to be in equilibrium. Get a load of this: we even had artists and programmers talking to each other! Mindboggling, isn’t it?”
>
> *– Franz Stradal,*
> Sacred*’s project lead*


Dwarf
Level 29
Skills 9
Weapon Lore 30
Constitution 13
Armor 10
Axe Lore 10
Weapon Technology 13
New Skill 1
Health 1711/1711
EXP for Next Level 14700
Attack 240
To Hit
Defense 179
0%
Weapon 282-380
Combat Arts 2-2
Resistance 953
Gold 977384
BACKPACK
COMBAT ARTS
COMBO
Sacred Pistol of the Heavens (0/1)
Dwarf
Ranged Combat
Price: 2986
Damage: 162-180
Level: 29
Physical: 46-51
Weapon Damage Physical: +14% Physical Regeneration
Physical Damage: +15%
Minimum Level: 21
+9% to Attack
Attack Speed: +8
Strength: +3

Passive skills are learned and improved by levelling up, but to acquire and upgrade abilities you must find special runes

Sacred 2 was also released for the PS3 and the Xbox 360. The gameplay became somewhat easier to fit the consoles but *Sacred 2’s* real flaw is an apparent lack of flow. The world is huge, but lacks a sense of pacing and atmosphere, while the main quest doesn’t convey the story very well. And, unfortunately, some bugs also found their way back into the sequel.

Still, *Sacred 2* expanded upon the previous game, with more depth to character progression, more loot, set items, mounts and multiplayer options. The improved graphics and sounds are also pleasing, though the camera can take some time getting used to. Once again Ascaron’s typical humour is present, with even more Easter eggs, references, silly loading messages and odd items like Jason’s mask. Overall, you’ll find devout fans for both *Sacred 1* and *2*.

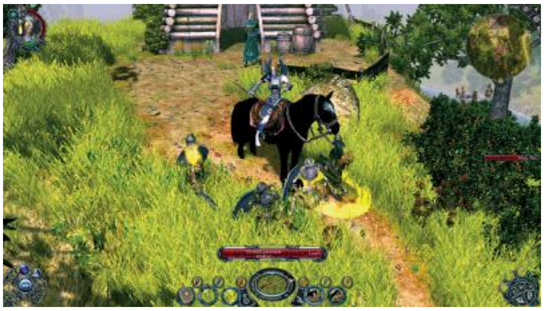
Sadly, while *Sacred 2* sold well, Ascaron spent far too much time and money developing it. They would still release the *Ice & Blood* add-on, with two extra regions and the Dragon Mage as a new character, but the company was dissolved soon after.

The *Sacred* brand was still strong, so Deep Silver bought the series’ licence. Their first release was a small spin-off project called *Sacred Citadel* (2013). A side-scrolling beat-‘em-up, its reviews were rather mixed; the game had little to do with the *Sacred* series and was quickly forgotten after its release.

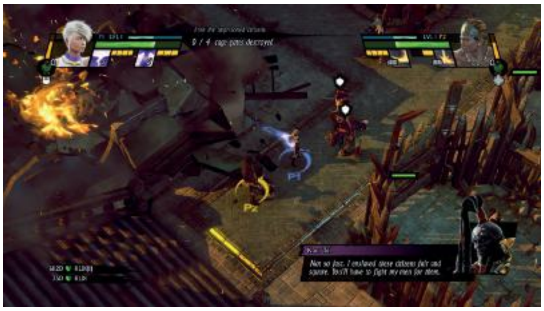
Sacred 3 arrived in 2014, but sadly it was a huge disappointment. Key features such as the vast open world, countless quests and ample loot were dropped (in fact, there’s no loot!) in exchange for a multiplayer arcade-like hack-and-slash divided into linear stages. The game’s dialogues are especially frustrating – a poor attempt at replicating the series’ humour, they end up as a barrage of witless, sarcastic quips that are more disheartening than the game’s own mediocrity. The game was widely bashed by reviewers and fans alike, bringing the *Sacred* series to its lowest point.

Regardless, the passion for the first two games remains, their light-hearted humour and open-world design still a thrill. Anyone into *Diablo* should do themselves a favour and give *Sacred 1* and *2* a try. **MHO**

***Sacred 2*’s Community Patch is highly recommended, as it fixes many bugs and adds cool new items. Also consider the *Free Camera* mod and the *Diablo 2 Fallen* mod, which overhauls the game with *Diablo*-inspired classes and lore.**



Sacred 2 went fully 3D and added more system depth, but the game’s vast world isn’t as well-designed and paced



Sacred 3 replaced the series’ formula with a multiplayer arcade-like hack-and-slash and was very poorly received

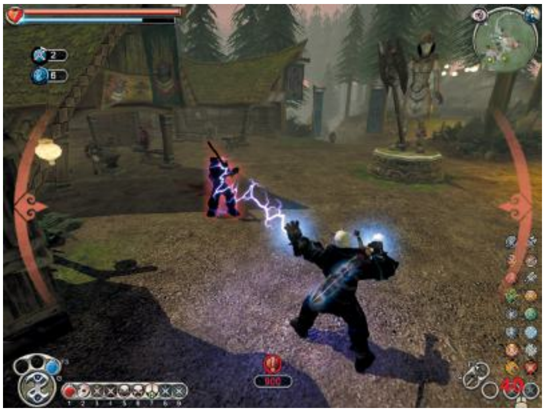
Fable

Lionhead Studios, 2004
Windows, Mac and Xbox

There are those who fondly remember *Fable* as the game that introduced a new generation of console gamers to western RPGs, while others remember it for its creator, Peter Molyneux, and his ludicrous promises. He hyped the game as a revolutionary RPG – a simulated world where years would pass, your character would age, form a family, the sons of murdered enemies would swear revenge and, famously, you would be able to plant an acorn and see it grow into a tree in real time. Unsurprisingly, the game didn't deliver all that, and those promises still taint any debate about the title. Which is a shame, since *Fable* is a great game even without that acorn.

In 2014, Lionhead released *Fable: Anniversary Edition*, a remake of the first game featuring a new difficulty mode and updated graphics.

Designed for the original Xbox, *Fable* isn't aimed at hardcore RPG veterans. Molyneux set out to create an RPG for all audiences, taking elements from *The Legend of Zelda*, *Knights of the Old Republic* and even from *The Sims*. The result is a streamlined action RPG in which players will make binary moral choices and endure the consequences, while travelling across a simulated fantasy world that, while not as revolutionary as promised, is still quite reactive.



Misbehaving inside towns will result in fines, and the guards will try to make you pay, but you can ignore that, murder everyone and buy their now-vacant houses and shops

You begin as a child, just as your village is raided and your family murdered. Rescued by a wizard, you are accepted at the Heroes' Guild, where you'll learn melee combat, archery and magic. These are tied to three stats – Strength, Skill and Will, respectively – which are the core of *Fable*'s character system.

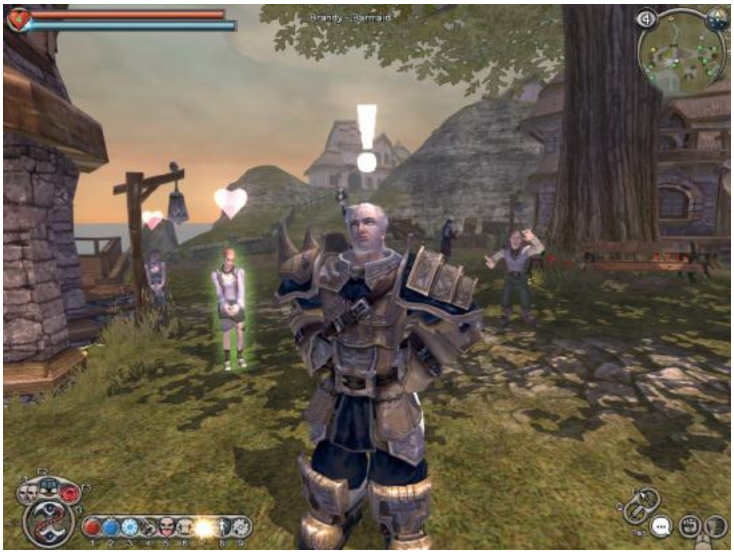
Every enemy you kill or quest you complete yields XP, but you'll also gain extra points for how you act. Using magic yields Will Experience, which can only be used to improve Will-related skills. Thus, by casting spells you'll learn new ones and become a better mage, and the game will reflect that visually.

You'll exit the guild as a weak, skinny teenager, but your appearance will change as you play. You'll grow larger as you raise your Strength, taller as you raise your Skill and, if you focus on Will, arcane signs will appear over your body and begin to glow. Even more, you can grow fat by eating too much food, gain scars as you get injured, get a tattoo, cut your hair or beard, and even grow horns if you become too evil.

These details are where *Fable* excels. The game's simulation is in fact a collection of countless small systems that, while shallow and unimpressive on their own, come together to create an immersive illusion. For example, you can marry almost any NPC in the game, by flirting with them, taking them to a house you purchased and gifting a wedding ring. You can even get divorced afterwards, and other NPCs in the street will comment on how unfortunate that is.

It all sounds very impressive, but looking closely you'll see the obvious limitations of the system. You can only interact with NPCs by choosing from a limited set of expressions, like "Flirt" or "Sexy Hero Pose"; getting married serves no purpose; buying houses is almost useless; NPCs have just one or two lines to say for every important action you perform.

> "I do think though, that innovation is a scary thing these days because it costs so much to make a game. I mean, it costs tens of millions of dollars, and when you've got crazy designers waving their arms around like me, saying, 'Why don't we try not using a mini-map?' or 'Why don't we try having interactive cutscenes?' then people are going, 'Yeah, well, okay, you can try that, but it's gonna cost you twenty million to do'. That is very scary for a lot of people."
>
> *– Peter Molyneux,*
> Fable*'s creator*

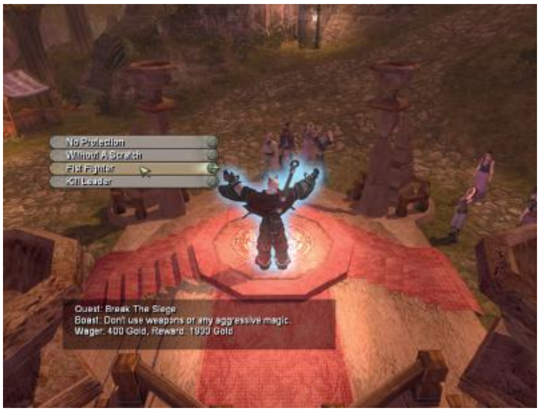


Interactions are limited to a few expressions and poses; NPCs will mostly cheer and admire a good hero or flee in terror from a dark hero

This reactivity, while mostly illusory, can be fun. It's quite gratifying to come back from a quest and be cheered and applauded as you walk into a tavern, with NPCs commenting on how you acted. The excellent soundtrack and the colourful art style add a lot to this, giving a light-hearted tone to the game. Overall, it still looks good, and natively supports HD resolutions.

What have not aged well are the small and linear areas. Instead of offering a huge open world, *Fable* is divided into small interconnected areas, separated by a loading screen. Another flaw is the save system, which doesn't record your progress mid-quest.

Fable also offers very few weapons and armour items to play with, and is quite easy and unbalanced. While that will frustrate players looking for a challenge, the game tries to compensate by offering plenty of secret treasures to find and a clever "boast" system, allowing confident heroes to add challenges to quests – such as completing them without using weapons.



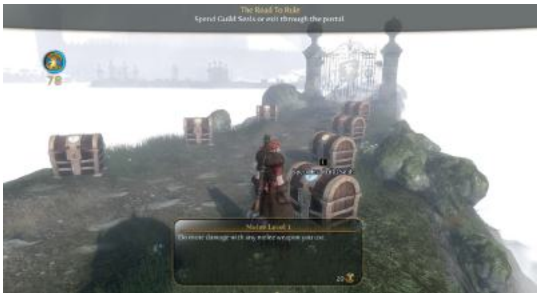
Quest: Break The Siege
Boast: Don't use weapons or any aggressive magic.
Wager: 400 Gold, Reward: 1900 Gold

Boasts allow you to wager that you're such an epic hero you can complete a quest despite extra handicaps or objectives

After the game's success, Lionhead Studios was acquired by Microsoft. *Fable II* (2008) was an amazing follow up that understood the appeal of the series and added more interesting choices, the option to have children, playable female characters, jobs, a more expansive world and even co-op play. It's the best game in the series, but remains an Xbox 360 exclusive.

Fable III (2010) returned to PCs but was again tainted by controversy. The core gameplay is similar to that of *Fable II*, but it suffered from over-hyping, cut features, a tacked-on ending and the bizarre choice to remove in-game menus – if you want to change your weapon, you must travel to a pocket dimension, walk to where the weapon is kept and then grab it. It's not a terrible game, but was a disappointment to many fans, who lashed out at Microsoft's interference in its development.

Beyond all the hype and promises, the *Fable* series always knew what it was: accessible, polished and lighthearted RPGs. They serve as great introductions to the genre or "comfort food" for a lazy afternoon of gaming, while also offering a few secrets and optional challenges for experienced players. **FE**



Instead of in-game menus, *Fable III* has you walking around pocket dimensions to manually buy skills or change equipment

***Fable* has a very small mod community, but it has made some nice new items and rebalance mods. You can find them at www.fabletlcmod.com.**

Space Rangers 2: Dominators

Elemental Games, 2004
Windows

The European and North American retail versions of *Space Rangers 2* came with an expansion pack called *Reboot*, plus the original *Space Rangers* game.

I have to hand it to the Russians – when they make videogames it feels as if they create something they really wanted to play, rather than a soulless product designed by a marketing committee.

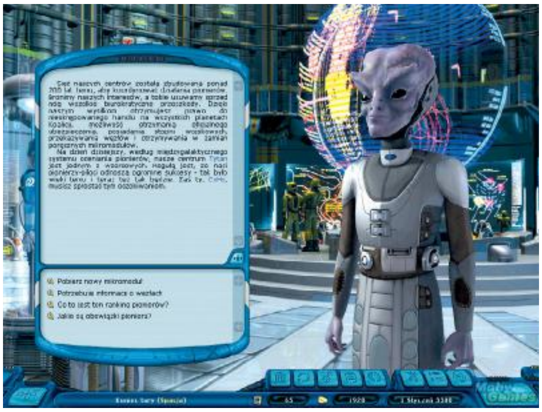
Space Rangers 2 is solid evidence of this. A space exploration RPG, it takes a kitchen-sink approach, tossing in arcade space fights, resource trading managers, real-time strategy battles, a faction popularity system, Choose-Your-Own-Adventure gamebooks and more. Game design such as this shouldn't work, as it appears to lack a tightly woven, cohesive experience. But how wrong that assumption is, and how much fun is the diverse, open-world experience contained here.

The game is set in a fictional universe in which several alien races are fighting for their survival against the Dominators – three factions of a robotic species intent on ruling over all organic life. It's not as if the alien races are providing a united front, however, as often each race runs its own defined territory, and each planet inside these territories has its own focus on industry and system of government.

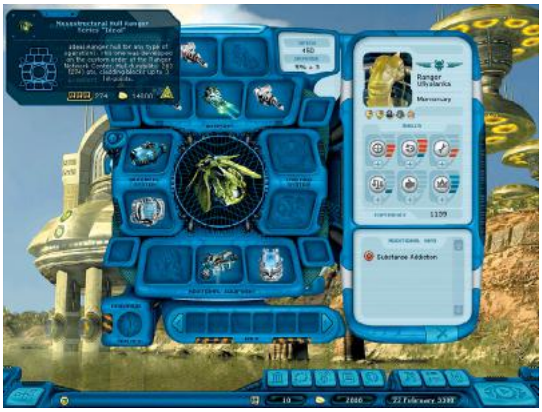
Since the planets in the game are so diverse, the prices of their goods and commodities also range greatly from planet to planet, resulting in a significant amount of trade in legal and illegal materials despite ongoing interstellar war. Piracy is also a factor, and it is not rare to see one trade ship with decent guns and shields target a richer, but less well-armed trade ship.

Amidst this chaos, the aliens races create a loose confederation in order to deal with both the growing presence of pirates and the invading forces of the Dominators, forming an interstellar police force known as the Space Rangers. This is where the player comes in, creating a character who is a trainee seeking graduation into the ranks of the Rangers. After some tutorial missions, the player is set loose into the open universe in order to do … well, whatever the player feels like doing, really.

As mentioned before, *Space Rangers 2* is quite open-ended and full of diverse activities. Initially the player will want to earn funds in order to beef up his spaceship or to purchase a new and better vessel.


Pobierz nowy mikromoduł
Potrzebuję informacji o węzłach
Co to jest ten ranking pionierów?
Jakie są obowiązki pioniera?

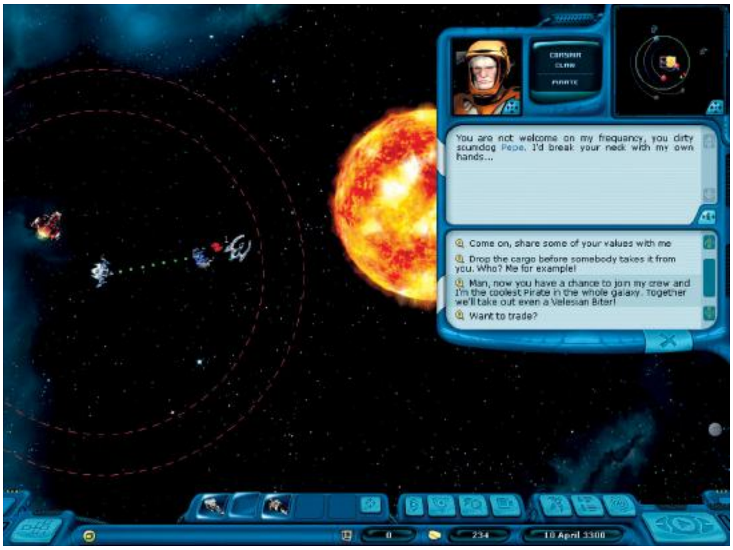
There are five races and five classes to play, and each combination has different ships and relationships



There are various ships, with lots of equipment, skills, artefacts, personal traits and even trophies to pursue

"One of the things we really enjoy about it is the variety; it really pulls something from just about every genre out there and rolls it up into one really great game. It's not just about turn-based space combat, or RTS robot battles. It is an RPG with you customising your character's abilities to create just the character you want; it's an adventure game where you explore an immense living and breathing universe; it's a game that's packed with hidden details and things to discover!"

– *David Mercer,*
Space Rangers 2 *producer*



You are not welcome on my frequency, you dirty scumdog Pepe. I'd break your neck with my own hands...

- Come on, share some of your values with me
- Drop the cargo before somebody takes it from you. Who? Me for example!
- Man, now you have a chance to join my crew and I'm the coolest Pirate in the whole galaxy. Together we'll take out even a Velesian Biter!
- Want to trade?

Space exploration and combat are turn-based, and you can contact allies and enemies at any time to trade, make requests or join forces

To do this, the character can take missions to hunt pirates or protect convoys. Alternatively, he or she can decide to be a miner of asteroids, a trader of commodities from planet to planet, or perhaps engage in a little of that piracy action.

There are also elaborate side-games inside the main space game. Ground combat missions hearken back to RTS games like *Command & Conquer*, complete with vehicular combat, tower defence and resource-gathering. And the several CYOA text-based scenarios range from stealing a spaceship to escaping from prison or simply managing a sky resort.

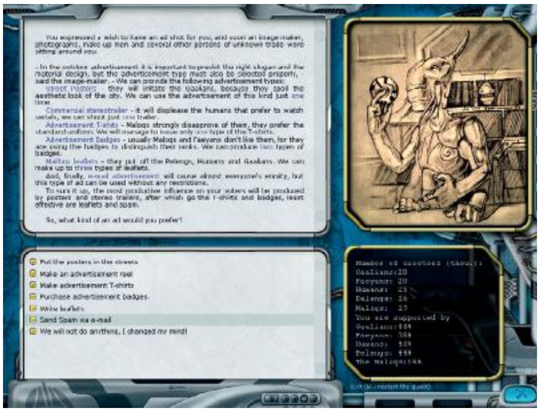
Since there are so many various factions in the game, and ways to interact with them, you will find your popularity changing through your decisions. For instance, if you save a member of one faction from a pirate attack, then the aided faction will trust you more, while pirates will see you as more of a threat and may start attacking you on sight.

You truly get the feeling that the developers were themselves gamers who worked passionately to create something inspired by games that were popular when they were in school.

There is a sandbox charm to *Space Rangers 2*, as, despite the constant battles and invasions, the Dominators will never completely conquer the galaxy. Therefore, the player can take his time exploring, questing, upgrading, fighting and enriching at his own pace, enjoying this unique game, full of charm, danger and a sprinkle of zaniness. **DT**

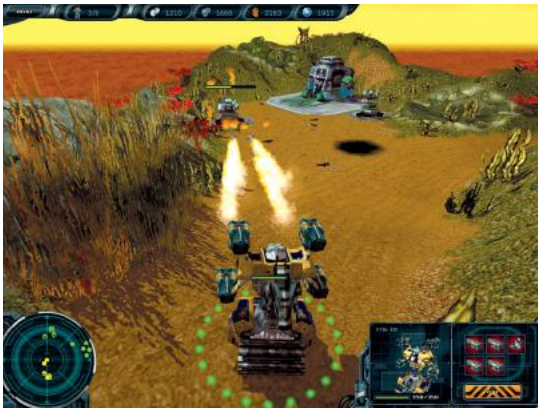
HD Version:

In October 2013, a new version of *Space Rangers 2* was released on Steam: *Space Rangers HD: A War Apart*. It adds a lot of content, such as new text adventures, quests, equipment and planetary battles, as well as a new sub-plot regarding a pirate threat to the galaxy.



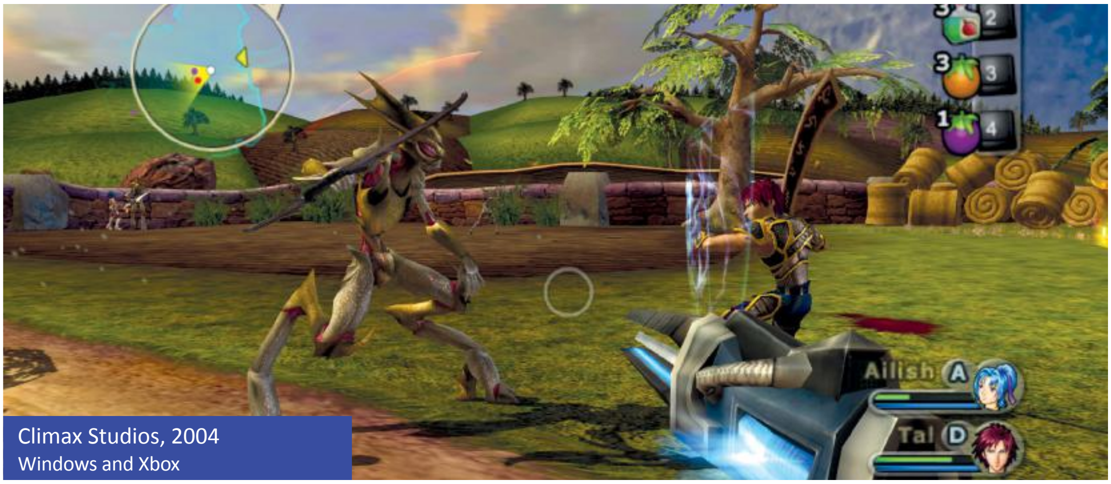
- Put the posters in the streets
- Make an advertisement reel
- Make advertisement T-shirts
- Purchase advertisement badges.
- Write leaflets
- Send Spam via e-mail
- We will not do anything, I changed my mind!

You'll face amusing Choose-Your-Own-Adventure mini-games, such as escaping prison or running an election



When fighting RTS battles on planets, you can design your own custom troops and even directly control them

Sudeki

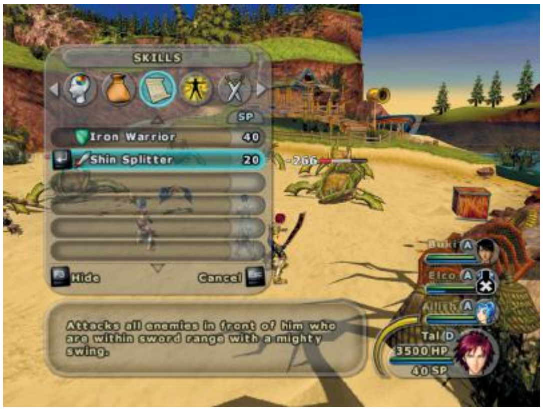


Climax Studios, 2004
Windows and Xbox

***Sudeki* was first released for the Xbox in 2004, then ported to PCs in 2005.**

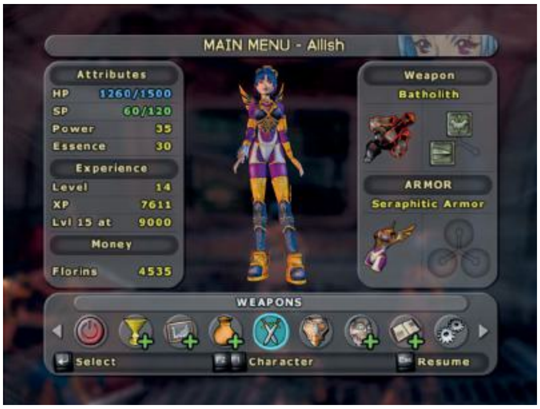
The first time I heard about *Sudeki*, it sounded like a joke on gamer stereotypes: Microsoft wanted a big RPG for the Xbox audience, so Climax Studios made them an FPS/JRPG hybrid.

Heavily advertised as a revolutionary title, this now-forgotten game is actually a modest action RPG starring four young characters: Tal, a reckless knight; Ailish, a princess with magical powers; Buki, a bestial huntress; and Elco, a gun-wielding scientist.



Attacks all enemies in front of him who are within sword range with a mighty swing.

The ranged characters battle in first-person, while melee fighters do their thing in third-person; each hero also has access to unique skills and powers



HP 1260/1500
SP 60/120
Power 35
Essence 30
Level 14
XP 7611
Lvl 15 at 9000
Florins 4535

With each level-up, you can increase one of your stats or learn a new skill; you can also add runes to your equipment, to give items new abilities

The game's defining feature is its unusual combat. During battles you control one character at a time, but can instantly swap between them. The melee fighters time attacks to create combos, as in a third-person RPG, whereas the ranged characters play like those in a first-person shooter, with multiple weapons that vary in damage, range and firing speed.

Outside combat, each hero also has an ability used to solve puzzles: Tal pushes crates, Ailish dispels illusions, Buki climbs certain walls and Elco has a jetpack.

Sadly, the game's world is very small and linear, with no real exploration. Areas are just long corridors filled with loot barrels and maybe one dull NPC, plus many obvious combat arenas: you enter them, the doors close and some level-scaled enemies spawn. Kill them all and the door opens. Rinse and repeat.

It feels underwhelming – a feeling that permeates the game as a whole. *Sudeki* has a nice list of features – two combat systems, magic skills, special summons, equipment upgrades, large boss battles, secrets, etc. – but they all lack in depth and quickly grow stale.

Luckily the game doesn't overstay its welcome, lasting only about 10–12 hours. This keeps things always moving, but also accentuates how paper-thin the plot is and how one-dimensional its heroes are.

If the writing is poor, the visuals are among the best the original Xbox produced. Characters may have an uncanny "Western anime" look, but everything else has a pleasing, colourful art style. The landscapes are especially pretty, and the soundtrack does a great job of giving personality to the world. It's a shame that it's such a small and limited world.

Much like *Fable*, *Sudeki* comes from a time when many Xbox owners were just discovering RPGs. It's accessible, simplistic and definitely not made for CRPG veterans, yet can still offer a fun little adventure. **FE**

The Bard's Tale

inXile Entertainment, Inc., 2004
Windows, Mac, PS2, Xbox, iPad, etc.*

One of the big mid-2000s trends were hack-and-slash action RPGs for consoles, such as *X-Men Legends*, *Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance*, *Champions of Norrath* and *Demon Stone*.

They were such a guaranteed hit that Interplay cancelled its PC-exclusive *Fallout 3* (a.k.a. *Van Buren*) to focus on *Fallout: Brotherhood of Steel* (2004), an infamously bad action RPG for PS2 and Xbox. By this time Brian Fargo had already sold Interplay and founded his new studio, inXile Entertainment, but he also joined the trend, releasing *The Bard's Tale*.

That doesn't mean that the game is devoid of originality. While borrowing *Dark Alliance*'s engine, *The Bard's Tale* is actually a satire on fantasy RPGs. You play as the Bard, an arrogant and lazy anti-hero voiced by Cary Elwes (Westley in *The Princess Bride*), who desires nothing but "coin and cleavage".

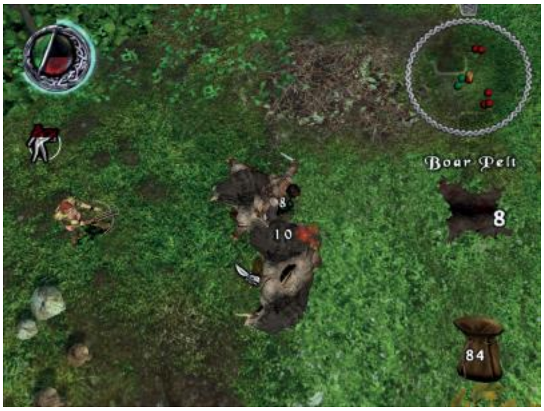
The game has a very light RPG system, with customisable stats and unlockable talents, but no inventory – loot is automatically converted into gold, and new weapons are auto-equipped. Certain dialogues also offer the choice of being "snarky" or "nice".

The humour is hit and miss. Some jokes are funny and the songs are well-executed, but there are also many lazy puns and dated pop culture references. Although the game enjoys making fun of fantasy clichés, the quest is as clichéd as it gets; the Bard just undertakes it while spewing snide remarks and arguing with the narrator, voiced by Tony Jay (Judge Frollo in Disney's *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*).

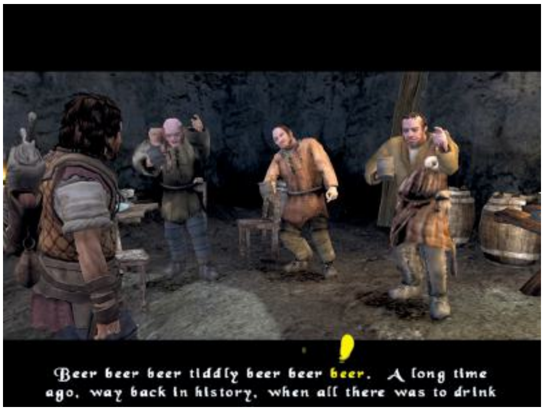
Despite being in an action RPG, combat is the game's weakest feature. All you do is attack in melee, fire ranged weapons or use a magical lute to summon allies. The interface, clearly designed for consoles, is terrible on PCs, and the more you advance, the more combat there is, ruining the pacing between jokes.

In the end, *The Bard's Tale's* biggest sin is its name. By itself, it is a decent light-hearted action RPG for consoles. Not as good as *Champions of Norrath* and other popular hack-and-slash titles, but not as terrible as *Fallout: Brotherhood of Steel* either. However, as a game that carries the legacy of Brian Fargo and shares his name with the classic *Bard's Tale* series, it's underwhelming – a reminder of how disappointing the mid-2000s were for classic CRPG fans. **FE**

***The Bard's Tale* was remastered in 2017, adding higher resolutions and the original *Bard's Tale* trilogy as a bonus.**



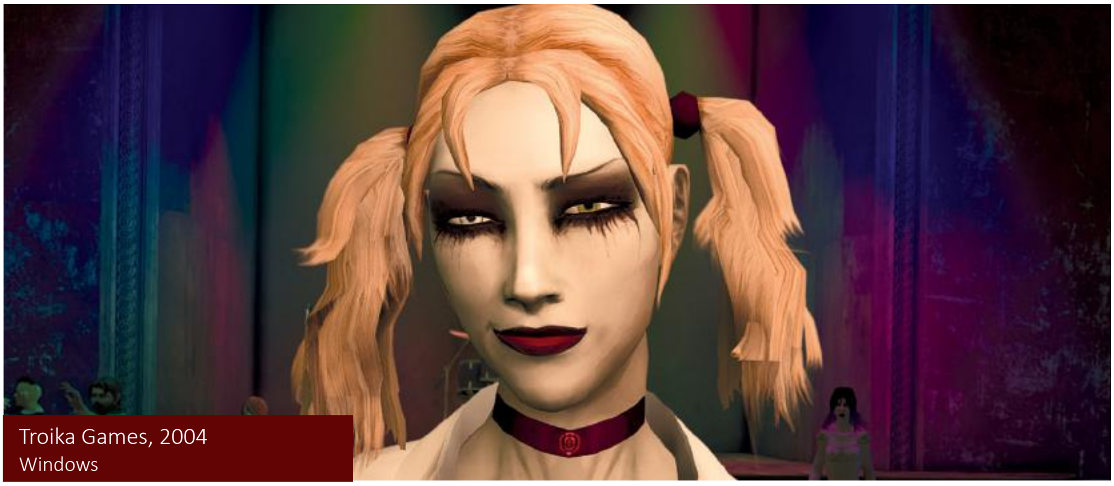
The game's controls are simple, but were made with controllers in mind and require a lot of input on radial menus



Beer beer beer tiddly beer beer beer. A long time ago, way back in history, when all there was to drink

Being a game about a bard, many songs are incorporated into the game, such as the "Charlie Mopps" sing-along song

Vampire:
The Masquerade - Bloodlines


Troika Games, 2004
Windows

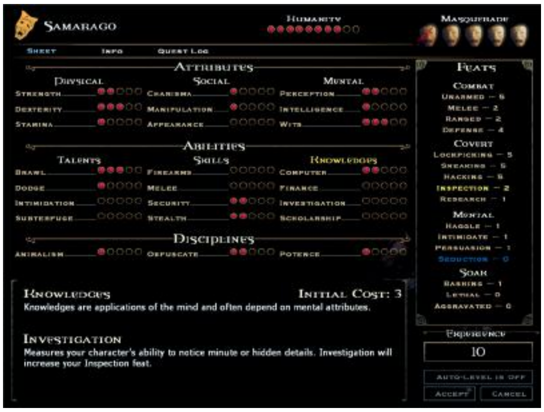
Vampire: The Masquerade - Bloodlines was the third and final RPG from Troika Games, the company founded by the *Fallout* veterans Leonard Boyarsky, Tim Cain and Jason Anderson.

The game was created using an early build of Valve's Source engine, rushed out by Activision and suffered heavily from being released on the same day as *Half-Life 2*, resulting in numerous bugs and weak sales. However, over time it became a cult classic. What's so great about *VtM: Bloodlines*? A lot of things, ranging from the overall storyline to minor details.

Bloodlines **features nine licensed music tracks, from artists such as Lacuna Coil, Tiamat and Genitorturers. However, these were all chosen by the publisher, with no input from Troika Games.**

The game manages to expertly merge classic RPG gameplay with modern FPS visuals. You experience the game as one of seven different vampire clans, who have different powers – allowing you to play *Bloodlines* like a shooter, a stealth game, a hack-and-slash or for a good part even as an adventure game, solving many situations without force, but by lock-picking, hacking, persuading, intimidating or seducing people.

Besides these various options, the game world itself manages to bridge two other extremes: you get large playable hubs that open up as the storyline progresses and offer dozens of unique side- and main quests, but the quests themselves are more linear in style and convey plot and atmosphere better than any sandbox game could do.



Humanity ●●●●●●●●○○

Strength ●●○○○
Dexterity ●●●○○
Stamina ●○○○○
Charisma ●○○○○
Manipulation ●○○○○
Appearance ○○○○○
Perception ●●○○○
Intelligence ●○○○○
Wits ●●●○○

Brawl ●●●○○
Dodge ●○○○○
Intimidation ○○○○○
Subterfuge ○○○○○
Firearms ○○○○○
Melee ○○○○○
Security ●●○○○
Stealth ●●○○○
Computer ●●○○○
Finance ○○○○○
Investigation ○○○○○
Scholarship ○○○○○

Animalism ●○○○○
Obfuscate ●●○○○
Potence ●○○○○

Unarmed — 6
Melee — 2
Ranged — 2
Defense — 4
Lockpicking — 5
Sneaking — 5
Hacking — 6
Inspection — 2
Research — 1
Haggle — 1
Intimidate — 1
Persuasion — 1
Seduction — 0
Bashing — 1
Lethal — 0
Aggravated — 0

Experience 10

Knowledges Initial Cost: 3
Knowledges are applications of the mind and often depend on mental attributes.

Investigation
Measures your character's ability to notice minute or hidden details. Investigation will increase your Inspection feat.

Bloodlines is quite faithful to the tabletop version, including the obligation to respect the Masquerade

Still, there are often multiple approaches possible in a quest, depending on your character, and other characters will react according to your behaviour, coming alive due to the great facial animations of the *Source* engine, some of the best voice-overs in gaming history and the witty writing of Brian Mitsoda. He created many very memorable characters and funny dialogues for *Bloodlines*, especially for the mad Malkavian clan that has entirely different dialogue options. Imagine talking to a TV set or to a STOP sign! Imagine a thin blood making references to the whole story that you can only understand once you finished it!

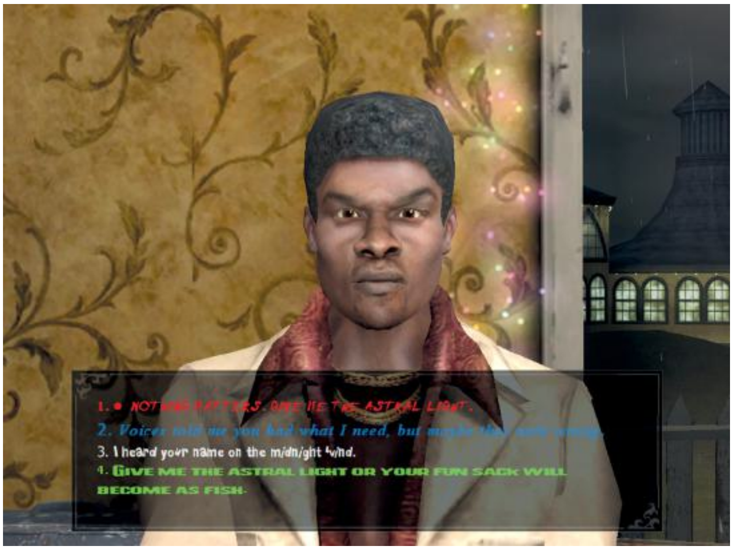
There are other great moments in the game, in which a character revelation may surprise you with a depth unusual for a computer game, and some of the different endings may make you laugh out loud, showing at the same time that everything in the plot made sense right from the start, but probably not exactly as you suspected.

The beautiful, handcrafted levels push the alpha version of the *Source* engine to its limits and enable you to visit greater Los Angeles: the windy beaches of Santa Monica, the busy skyscrapers downtown, the fancy streets in Hollywood and even the Far Eastern charm of Chinatown, with excursions to several external locations like strange mansions or dark caverns thrown into the mix as well.

Your adventures will vary from straightforward fights against humans, vampires or other supernatural creatures to solving the mystery of a haunted hotel without any combat, a level that is regarded as one of the spookiest locations in gaming ever!

"I like the characters to come off like people actually do – they don't say 'hi' when strangers come knocking, they say 'who the hell are you?' or they're expecting you and know more then they let on, or they don't care. I don't like my NPCs to be standing around as if their lives begin when the character starts talking to them and end when the player leaves. Characters are the protagonists of their own games, from their perspective."

– Brian Mitsoda,
VtM: Bloodlines*' writer*


1. • NOT [illegible] MATTERS. GIVE ME THE ASTRAL LIGHT.
2. Voices told me you had what I need, but [illegible]
3. I heard your name on the midnight wind.
4. GIVE ME THE ASTRAL LIGHT OR YOUR FUN SACK WILL BECOME AS FISH.

Not only are there various dialogue skills such as Intimidate and Seduction, but all dialogues are completely different and twisted when playing as a Malkavian

Combine this with the powerful music of Rik Schaffer and the mature handling of adult themes and you get a dark, atmospheric RPG that fits the *World of Darkness* setting perfectly.

Also impressive are the lengths the game goes to to honour the source material. Besides the aforementioned Malkavians and their unique dialogues, there's the Nosferatu, hideous vampires that must avoid being seen at all costs and cannot communicate with NPCs normally, forcing you to make clever use of stealth.

Although Troika closed its doors after releasing only two official patches, the community stepped in and an Unofficial Patch appeared that fixed most of the open issues and restored a lot of unfinished or cut content, most of which was still hidden in the game files. The patch is still being updated ten years after the rushed release of the game and, with it, *Bloodlines* finally becomes the last masterpiece of Troika it deserves to be! **WS**

Mods and Patches:

Unofficial Patch: The basic patch fixes countless bugs, and the optional plus patch restores a lot of cut content, including dialogues, quests and even maps. Mandatory for anyone trying to play the game.

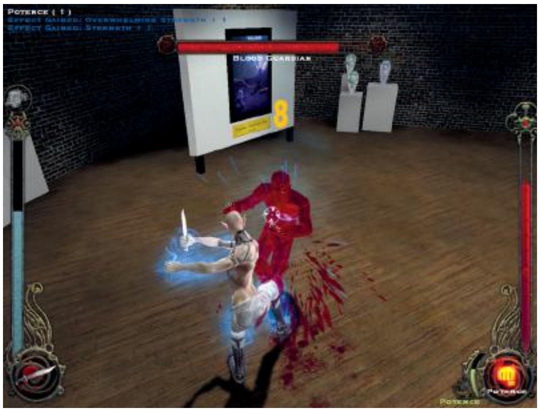
VtM: The Final Nights: A fan-made expansion pack that adds 7 new clans, new disciplines, NPCs, items, quests, a haggle system and other surprises.

Clan Quest Mod: Adds a series of quests to the game, including one quest specific to each clan.

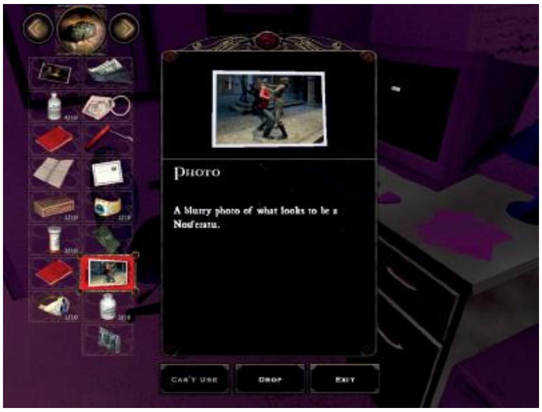
VtMB: Camarilla Edition: Overhauls how Disciplines work and other interesting changes such as making you constantly need to drink blood to avoid starving.

Bloodlines: Antitribu Mod: A large mod that adds seven new clans, new disciplines and weapons and hundreds of new characters, plus several tweaks to the combat and visuals. Highly recommended.

In 2014, a group of fans began Project Vaulderie, an attempt to port *Bloodlines* over to the Unity Engine. Sadly, the project received a Cease and Desist letter from CCP Games and had to abandon development.



Melee combat happens in third-person mode, but the game switches to first-person when you equip guns

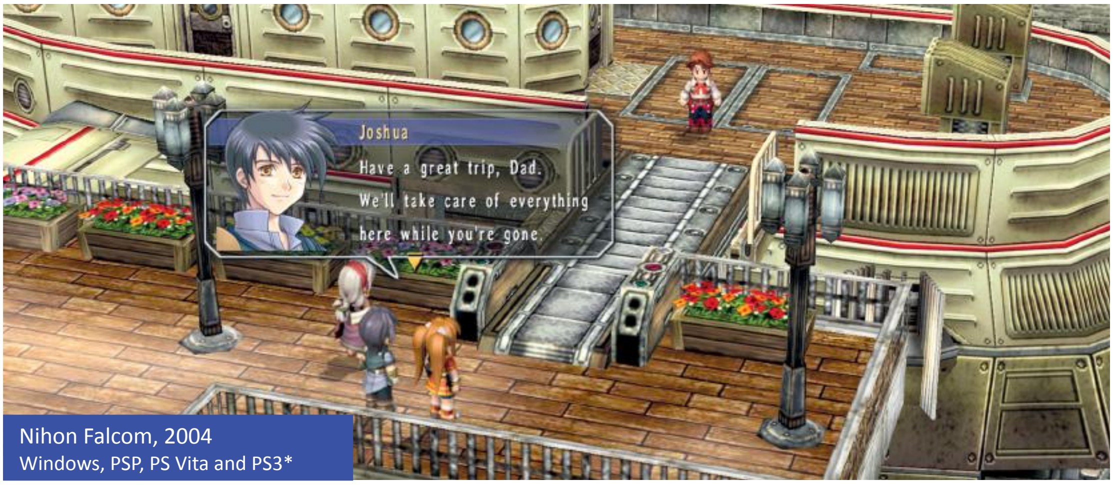


Photo

A blurry photo of what looks to be a Nosferatu.

The game offers various amusing side-quests, most of them with various different approaches and solutions

The Legend of Heroes: Trails in the Sky


Joshua
Have a great trip, Dad. We'll take care of everything here while you're gone.

Nihon Falcom, 2004
Windows, PSP, PS Vita and PS3*

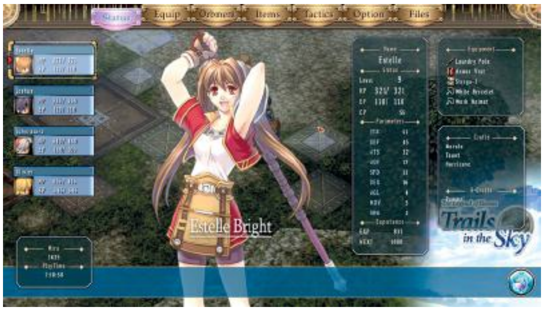
***Trails in the Sky* was first released in Japan in 2004, as a PC exclusive. The PSP port was localised into English in 2011 by XSEED Games, and an enhanced PC version was released on Steam in 2014.**

The Legend of Heroes series began as an offshoot of the *Dragon Slayer* series by Nihon Falcom, with its first entry, *Dragon Slayer: The Legend of Heroes* being released in 1989 in Japan for the PC-8801 computer. After five more releases throughout the '90s for Japanese computers, *The Legend of Heroes: Trails in the Sky* (also known as *First Chapter* or simply *FC*) was released in Japan in 2004.

While part of *The Legend of Heroes* series, *Trails in the Sky*'s story does not connect to previous entries, and it acts (alongside its two sequels) as a stand-alone trilogy within a larger universe of games.

Later games in the series do take place on the same continent as the *Trails* games, including the Crossbell duology (*The Legend of Heroes VII: Zero no Kiseki* and *The Legend of Heroes VII: Ao no Kiseki*) and the *Trails of Cold Steel* trilogy, but these latter two metaseries focus on different countries and characters.

Trails in the Sky takes place in the country of Liberl on the continent of Zemuria, and follows Estelle Bright and her adopted brother, Joshua, as they travel across the country training to be Bracers – members of a guild which spans the continent and helps citizens in situations involving investigation and combat, without ties to any governmental body.



The game has several stats, but levelling up is automatic; only equipment and Quartz will alter your stats

At the same time, they are trying to find their father, a highly ranked Bracer who disappears under mysterious circumstances. The story begins at a very small scale, before expanding to a grandiose epic involving treason, shadowy organisations, and characters who are not who they claim to be. The entire trilogy benefits from a stellar localisation done by XSEED Games, which retains the epic storytelling and wry humour of the Japanese original.

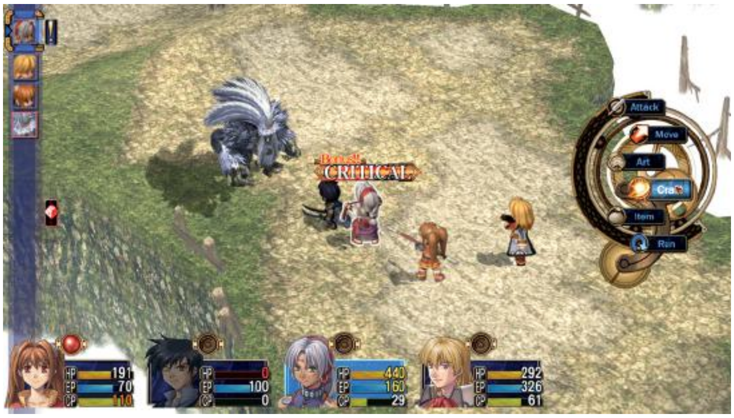
Trails in the Sky presents itself from an isometric perspective in which the camera can be freely rotated. The game's art style combines cute "chibi" sprites, hand-drawn 2D portraits, and 3D models for the world geography and some enemies. Character and enemy designs are reminiscent of those in other Nihon Falcom RPGs, with a '90s anime look for the characters, combined with influences from steampunk and European medieval styling.

The gameplay is that of a traditional JRPG. The party travels from town to town, pursuing the main quest and acquiring optional side-quests. These range from monster hunts through fetch quests to longer, story-heavy sequences that feel more akin to visual novels or adventure games.

Here lies one of the series' most celebrated aspects: world-building. While RPGs like *Skyrim* populate their world with generic NPCs running on a script, *Trails in the Sky* has only handwritten characters – be it a citizen, a traveller or a shopkeeper, they all have names, personalities and ambitions.

As your story advances, so do theirs. They'll start dating, get jobs, argue with their families, go on journeys, etc. Instead of just blurting out exposition or waiting to be helped by the protagonists, they each have their own lives – and by following them you can understand and immerse yourself in their world.

> "Normally in Japanese RPGs, a lot of time and effort is spent on the main story. *Trails in the Sky* is unique in the sense that we spent as much or perhaps even more time and effort working on character conversations and additional elements. By doing so, it really makes the world come alive, and creates a setting that's both fantastical and realistic in equal parts."
>
> *– Toshihiro Kondo, Nihon Falcom's President*



Your party can have up to four characters; the sidebar on the left side of the screen shows whose turn is next and when a buff will appear

Combat in the *Trails in the Sky* series is turn-based, set in a tactical grid. Besides traditional JRPG commands like Attack, Item, and Run, there are also two types of special ability: Art and Craft.

Art uses mana and closely resembles the Materia system in *Final Fantasy VII*. Each character equips gems called Quartz, which offer several stat bonuses and can unlock magic spells depending on the colour combinations currently equipped.

Craft, on the other hand, is inherent to each hero and uses Craft Points (CP), which are earned by dealing or taking damage in combat. By storing enough CP you can unleash special attacks that can be used any time – even if it's the enemy's turn.

This is important, as turn order plays a big role: special buffs are granted every few turns, healing or strengthening the active character, so it's important to manipulate the turn order to get those buffs.

FC was followed by two sequels: *Trails in the Sky SC* (*Second Chapter*) in 2006 and *Trails in the Sky: The 3rd* in 2007. *SC* takes place immediately following the events of the first game, with almost entirely identical gameplay (save for a new Chain Attack feature).

Overall, *FC* and *SC* feel like one large game broken up into two smaller chunks, and *SC* resolves around Estelle and Joshua's story.

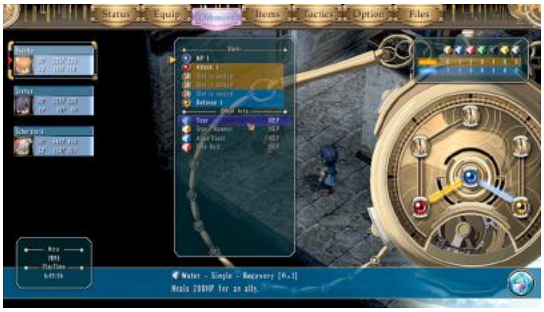
Trails in the Sky: The 3rd follows a character introduced in *SC* named Kevin Graham, a priest for the Septian Church, and his old friend Ries Argent, as they are sent to a mysterious realm called Phantasma. There they must figure out the mysteries of this new domain and escape it, while Kevin wrestles with his literal and figurative demons.

The 3rd plays more like a hybrid of the traditional JRPG stylings of the first two games and the dungeon-crawling and demonic/religious imagery of the *Persona* series. It also seeks to tie up the loose ends left behind at the end of *SC*, while setting up events for later games like the *Cold Steel* series.

What makes the *Trails* series interesting is how it feels like a classic '90s JRPG, with turn-based combat, an epic storyline, anime art style and a memorable soundtrack (featuring influences from jazz, classical, Japanese rock and pop, and progressive rock), all while containing modern conveniences such as being able to save anywhere, enemies visible on the map and being able to run from any encounter. The excellent PC port and localisation only sweeten the deal.

In my mind, the *Trails in the Sky* games are the pinnacle of classic JRPG design, and a must-play for any fan of Nihon Falcom's other works and turn-based RPGs in general. **NB**

***Trails in the Sky* was remastered for the PS Vita in 2015, featuring voice acting and a reworked soundtrack. You can use the *Evolution OST* mod to play the Steam version with this new soundtrack.**



Water - Single - Recovery [0.1]
Heals 2000HP for an ally.

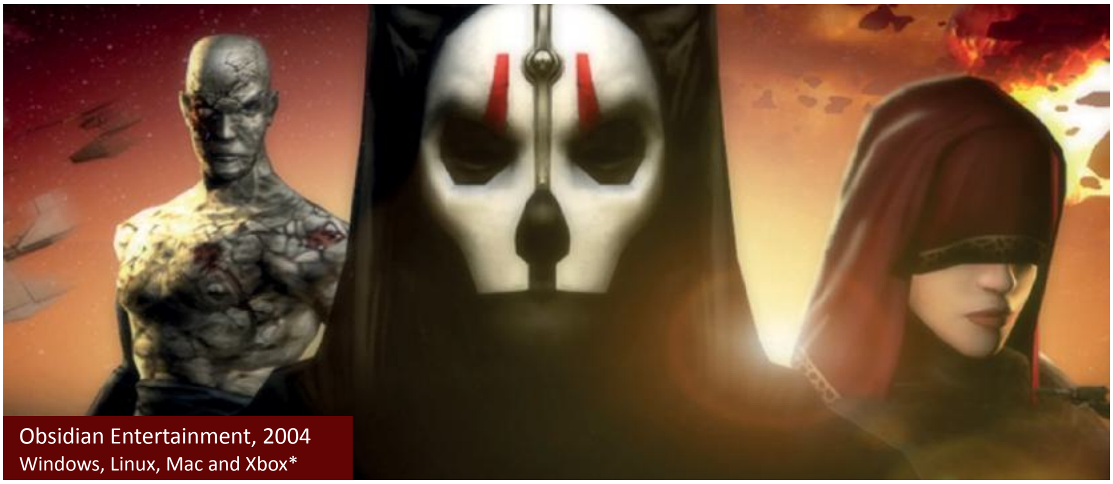
Each character has an item they equip Quartz on; the many colours and combinations provide stat boosts and new spells

Trails in the Sky has an outstanding amount of dialogue, most of it found when chatting with NPCs in town

Star Wars:

Knights of the Old Republic II

The Sith Lords



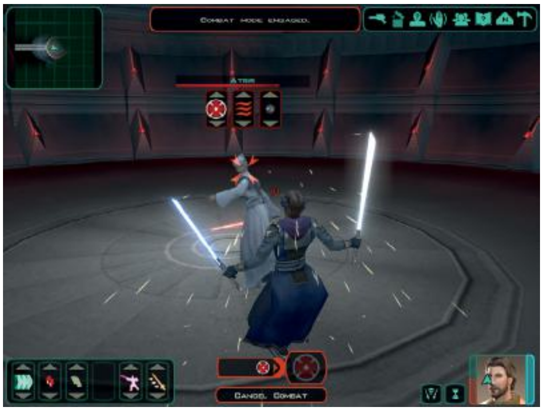
Obsidian Entertainment, 2004
Windows, Linux, Mac and Xbox*

***The Sith Lords* was originally released only for the Xbox and PC, but Aspyr Media developed official Mac and Linux ports in 2015, together with a patch adding Steam Workshop support.**

When Interplay closed Black Isle Studios in 2003, Feargus Urquhart teamed up with a few veteran developers to form Obsidian Entertainment. They then used their connections with BioWare to secure the rights to produce a sequel for the recently released *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic*. Constantly stumbling on cables which took over most of the floor and waging a treacherous battle against deadlines, Chris Avellone's team emerged victorious, giving us a true masterpiece.

The Sith Lords takes places a few years after its predecessor. The Sith have changed tactics and are now attacking from shadows, while the Republic is crumbling and the Jedi are either dead or in hiding. In this grim scenario, players assume the role of a Jedi exile, who has lost their connection to the Force.

Presenting rich personal stories and a mature narrative enchanted with some great writing and deep characters, *The Sith Lords* vastly outshines its prequel. Carefully crafted, its charismatic villains, memorable dialogues and dark setting are all accompanied by an elaborate deconstruction of the *Star Wars* universe.



The Sith Lords introduces lightsaber and Force forms, allowing you to drastically change your fighting stance to best counter a foe

Indisputably, *KotOR2's* greatest achievement is the character of Kreia and her unique perspective on the *Star Wars* universe. A former Jedi, now acting as the protagonist's mentor, she shares very original and interesting opinions on the nature of the Force, alongside with a questionable, but well-intentioned morality.

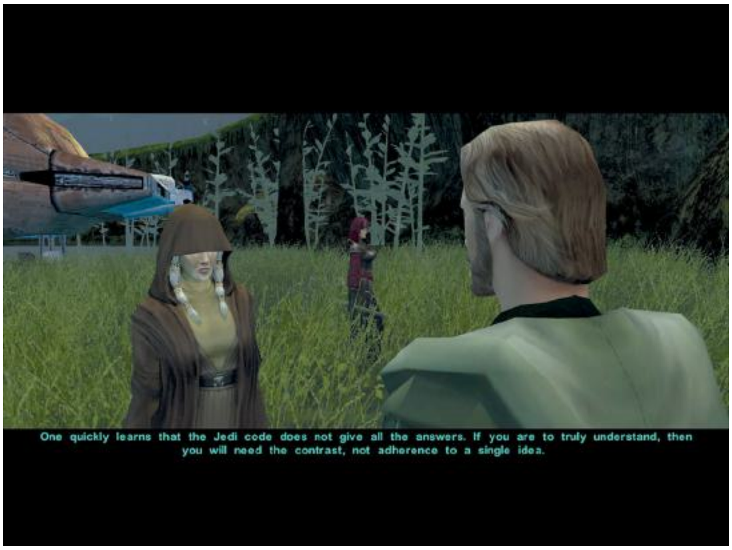
For her, not only does the concept of "the will of the Force" negate any notion of personal choice, but "the balance of the Force" makes the everlasting Light Side versus Dark Side conflict completely meaningless and unwinnable. Even the greatest good, achieved by the greatest sacrifices will go to waste because eventually a greater evil will have to emerge so the balance may be preserved. Any goodness done would go away, but its side effects, deaths and suffering will stay, so the final score would always be negative.

Therefore, the Force influence on all living things is negative, and the "good versus evil" battle brings only destruction on an immense scale. Kreia expresses a mix of Nietzschean/Spencerian morality, has strong opinions on everything and loves manipulating people to do her bidding.

Her voice actress, Sarah Kestelman, should also be mentioned with great reverence due to her truly outstanding work, without which the character wouldn't be half as endearing. She can pull off even the subtlest hints of emotion, enchanting and expanding the meaning of every spoken line. Her majestic performance shows that voice acting can be an art, as her work is head and shoulders above not only most – if not all – videogames out there, but movie and animation voice actors as well.

Kreia, born from Chris Avellone questioning the founding concepts of *Star Wars* universe, is – simply put – one of the best videogame characters of all time, and more than enough reason to play *The Sith Lords*.

> “A lot of it came from deep-rooted feelings and opinions about the *Star Wars* franchise, both positive and negative, and especially what it would feel like to be a Jedi or Sith in that universe. I’ve always had an issue with the Force because of its predestination aspects, and I wonder if any Jedi or Sith would ever want to rebel against it entirely … and if they’d be willing to give up their ties to the Force (and all that power) to do it.”
>
> *– Chris Avellone,*
> KotoR 2*’s lead designer*



One quickly learns that the Jedi code does not give all the answers. If you are to truly understand, then you will need the contrast, not adherence to a single idea.

Kreia is one of the most memorable characters in gaming, and brings a unique perspective to the *Star Wars* universe

If writing is *The Sith Lords*’ highlight, combat is its weakest aspect. It hasn’t changed much from its predecessor, except that the new skills are massively unbalanced – which has its good sides, as it enables players to get through encounters faster. The crafting system, on the other hand, has been greatly expanded and polished, providing many customisation options and allowing for power gaming, which manages to squeeze some additional fun from the combat.

The soundtrack is nothing short of excellent. Mark Griskey’s work successfully complements the game’s dark undertones and manages to convey the desired mood of every scene, all without losing that distinct feeling *Star Wars* music should have.

Sadly, due to a sudden change of heart from the publisher, Obsidian was forced to end development prematurely, releasing an unfinished and buggy game and cutting a big chunk of its content, which was later heroically restored by modders after years of work.

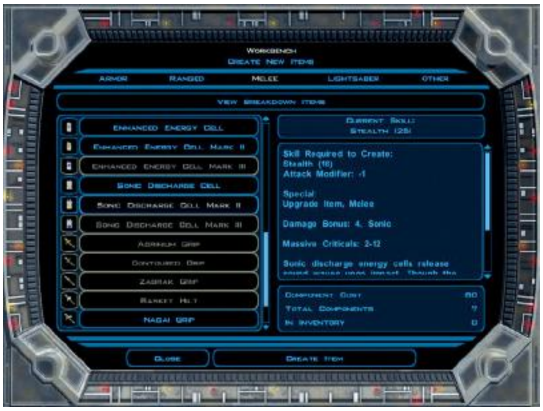
If you value well-crafted characters, mature plots and great writing in games, then you should definitely give *The Sith Lords* a try. Even if you favour combat-focused RPGs, the sheer strength of the aforementioned aspects should make you consider playing this gem, especially now that its technical problems have been addressed by modders. **JMR**

Mods:

The Sith Lords Restored Content Mod (TSLRCM): The team worked closely with some of Obsidian’s developers to restore the game’s cut content, while also fixing hundreds of bugs. A must-have.

M4-78EP: An optional part of the *TSLRCM*, it adds a new planet to the game, which was cut during development and had to be entirely recreated.

Revenge of Revan: A demo for a now abandoned fan-made expansion, it offers some great moments.



Workbench
Create New Items
Armor
Ranged
Melee
Lightsaber
Other
View Breakdown Items
Enhanced Energy Cell
Enhanced Energy Cell Mark II
Enhanced Energy Cell Mark III
Sonic Discharge Cell
Sonic Discharge Cell Mark II
Sonic Discharge Cell Mark III
Adrenum Grip
Contoured Grip
Zabrak Grip
Rakett Hilt
Nagai Grip
Close
Create Item

Current Skill: Stealth (25)

Skill Required to Create:
Stealth (16)
Attack Modifier: -1

Special
Upgrade Item, Melee

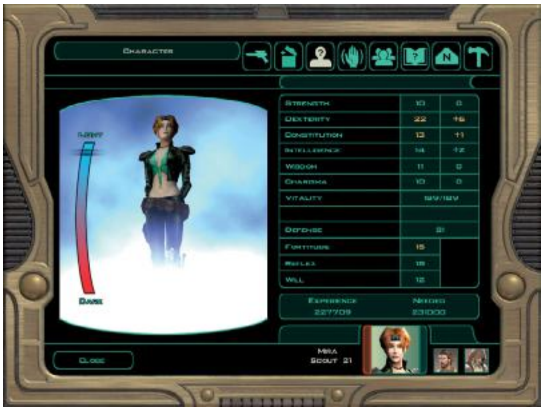
Damage Bonus: 4, Sonic

Massive Criticals: 2-12

Sonic discharge energy cells release

Component Cost 80
Total Components 9
In Inventory 0

The Sith Lords’ crafting system is one of the best in RPGs: it’s very flexible and makes use of every skill in the game



Character
Light
Dark
Close

Strength	10	0
Dexterity	22	+6
Constitution	13	+1
Intelligence	14	+2
Wisdom	11	0
Charisma	10	0
Vitality	129/129	
Defense	21	
Fortitude	15	
Reflex	18	
Will	12	

Experience 227709
Needed 231000

Mira
Scout 21

There are 12 companions in the game, with some of them exclusive to specific genders or alignments

2005-2009: The peak of AAA & the casual revolution

The second half of the 2000s saw the videogame industry tightly held by a handful of giant publishers such as EA, Activision and Ubisoft, plus three console manufacturers – Nintendo, Sony and Microsoft.

The new seventh console generation pushed development costs higher than ever with the jump to HD resolutions. AAA releases became blockbusters, and successful titles were turned into iconic franchises: *Assassin's Creed, God of War, Mass Effect, Call of Duty, BioShock*, *Batman: Arkham, Gears of War*, etc. On the other hand, EA executive Richard Hilleman estimates that the number of AAA teams worldwide shrank from 125 to 25 during this generation. To survive, third-party titles had to come out on every platform and avoid any risks.

Many smaller companies fled from console costs and thrived on handhelds like the Nintendo DS and the Sony PSP, especially in Japan. Meanwhile, entire genres perceived as risky, niche or outdated – such as turn-based RPGs – were abandoned by most Western developers.

To better fit this console-dominated market, many traditions from PCs had to be adapted, leading to things such as *Mass Effect*'s (2007) dialogue wheel, *Gears of War*'s (2006) controller-oriented cover-based shooting and the use of DLCs instead of expansions sold in a box.

However, people weren't interested only in cutting-edge games – the mid-2000s saw an explosion of free online games, with players across the globe accessing Newgrounds and Flash game portals to play titles like *Line Rider* (2006), *Fancy Pants Adventures* (2006) and *QWOP* (2008), as well as amateur games made with tools like *RPG Maker, AGS* and *Ren'Py*.

Free-to-play browser games like *Neopets* (1999), *Travian* (2004), *Club Penguin* (2005) and later *FarmVille* (2009) grew to reach millions of players, but more traditional small & mid-sized developers were having a hard time surviving, as buying independent PC games in the mid-2000s wasn't easy – few physical stores sold them, download speeds were slow, and buying games directly from the developers' websites was a convoluted process. As such, free indie games like *Cave Story* (2004) would become hits, but early commercial ones like *Lands of Legends* (2005), *Weird Worlds* (2005), *Mr. Robot* (2007) and *Eschalon* (2007) never reached the mainstream.

Things began to change with new online stores like GOG, Desura, Direct2Drive, Impulse, GamersGate and Green Man Gaming, as well as Steam opening itself to third-party titles in 2005. Though very limited at first, consoles too would start online stores, like the Xbox Live Arcade.

Finally, while the financial recession of 2007–2008 didn't affect games as much as other industries, the crisis in printed journalism did. Several established gaming magazines such as *Computer Gaming World*, *PC Zone*, *Electronic Gaming Monthly* and *Computer and Video Games* all went out of business, unable to compete with freely available websites.

Trends:

Smartphones: Nokia had already shown the potential of mixing mobile phones with games when it added the famous *Snake* game to its Nokia 6110 back in 1997. The company would keep trying with the short-lived N-Gage, a mobile phone + handheld console hybrid, as well as with the expensive N95 smartphone. But it was only in 2007, with the release of Apple's iPhone, that smartphones would take over the world, quickly followed by Google's Android OS and a frenzy of mobile games – such as the iconic *Angry Birds* (2009).

Apple's 2007 iPhone and HTC's 2008 G1 Mobile – the first mobile phone to run Android OS

Indie Games: While development costs for AAA games were as high as ever, new design tools allowed for independent developers to make smaller games on their own, and the new digital distribution channels, such as Steam and Xbox Live Arcade, gave gamers safe and easy access to these titles. The arrival of games like *Braid*, *Spelunky*, *Castle Crashers* and *World of Goo* – all released in 2008 – proved that there was a profitable market for smaller and more daring titles, creating what became known as the indie game scene.

Castle Crashers was released in 2008 and sold over 2.6 million copies on Xbox Live

---

Facebook Games: In 2007, Facebook began to allow other companies to develop apps for its social network. What started with very simple games soon led to a boom in social network games, such as Zynga's *Mafia Wars* and *FarmVille*. Like many browser games before them, they were free-to-play but designed around addictive micro-transaction systems – the "freemium" model. They conquered millions of players, with Zynga peaking at 265 million monthly active users spread across all its games in early 2013.

For two whole years, *FarmVille* was the most popular game on Facebook

---

PlayStation 2
Guitar Hero
Guitar Hero sparks a trend of music rhythm games, with over 30 similar games being released in just a few years, then quickly dying out.

The **Xbox 360** is released, with an improved (but now paid) Xbox Live service. Despite initial technical issues, it sold over 84 million units.

The **Playstation 3** is released, offering Blu-ray playback, a complex multi-core processor and a free online service. It sold over 87 million units.

The **Blu-ray Disk** wins the war against the HD-DVD and becomes the standard for the movie industry and, later, for 8th-gen consoles.

Minecraft's alpha version is released. It would become the quintessential indie game, insanely popular and selling over 230 million copies.

2005 | 2006 | 2007 | 2008 | 2009

YouTube is launched, allowing anyone to easily publish and watch videos. A perfect fit for games, it became a prominent new medium and led to extremely popular gaming channels.

Steam, first released in 2003 as an update tool for Valve's games, begins to sell third-party titles. It would grow into the world's largest online game retailer, reaching 1 billion accounts in 2019.

The **Wii** is released, introducing motion controls and targeting a broader audience outside core gamers. The most popular console of the seventh-generation, it sold over 101 million units.

Android OS is released, created by Google based on Linux. First used on smartphones, it later jumped to tablets and consoles, such as the Nvidia Shield handheld and the crowd-funded Ouya.

League of Legends
League of Legends is released. Inspired by the *Warcraft III* mod *DOTA*, this free-to-play title became one of the world's most played game, with over 180 million monthly players as of 2021.

Super Columbine Massacre RPG!

20 63 AM 04/20/99

Danny Ledonne, 2005
Windows

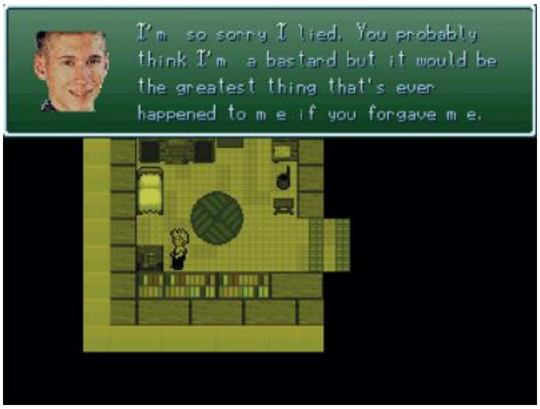
The game was released for free, alongside a forum dedicated to debating the Columbine shootings.

On April 20, 1999, senior students Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold entered Columbine High School and began a school shooting, killing 12 students and one teacher, plus wounding 21 other victims. The two killers then committed suicide.

The United States was shocked by this tragedy, and the aftermath was a frantic search for reasons – and/or someone to blame – be it guns, depression, bullying, Goth culture, Marilyn Manson or violent videogames – both boys were avid *Doom* players.

So, it's easy to imagine the public outrage when independent film-maker Danny Ledonne anonymously released *Super Columbine Massacre RPG!*, a free game in which you play as Eric and Dylan.

First released on April 20, 2005, six years after the shootings, the game initially flew under the radar. About a year later it began being reported by gaming websites like Gamasutra, and soon the mainstream press was all over it – the game eventually reached over 700,000 downloads. Danny Ledonne's identity as the game's author was then leaked, and so he decided to come out and stand up for his creation.



I'm so sorry I lied. You probably think I'm a bastard but it would be the greatest thing that's ever happened to m e if you forgave m e.

Flashback scenes provide background to the boys' lives, experiences and frustrations: each flashback of suffering relived raises their level as killers

An amateur game created on *RPG Maker 2003*, *Super Columbine Massacre RPG!* blends 16-bit-era sprites with digitised photos of the tragedy, in a disturbing fusion of fiction and reality. The game begins with Eric and Dylan preparing themselves, sneaking into school to plant bombs and then executing the shooting, killing dozens of victims in JRPG-like battles. Said battles are almost entirely one-sided, with the victims mostly just cowering in fear, while you select a gun or bomb to kill them.

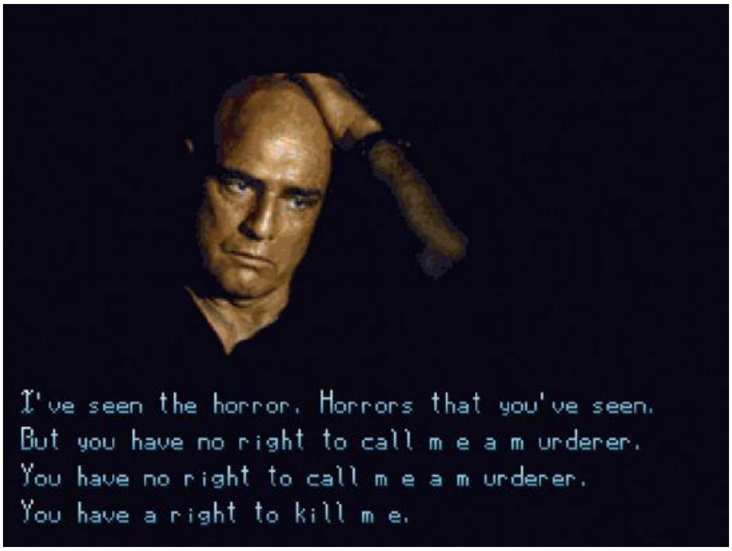
While a brutal game, violence in *SCMRPG!* is presented in a pointless, juvenile way, with lines like "Dylan dodges *Matrix* style" and other silly boasts. After the boys' suicide, there's a dream-like section where they go to Hell and fight hordes of *Doom* monsters, padded out to such length that even the most bloodthirsty players will tire of it.

As you explore the school, you'll relieve the events of that tragic day, as well as trigger flashbacks of the frustration, anxiety and bullying that the two boys lived. There's a surprising and well-researched depth here, with the game taking a documentary-like approach and showing real facts of their lives, like how Eric was prescribed drugs for his social anxiety and those prevented him from joining the Marines, or how he ran into a school "rival" before starting the shootings, forgave him and told him to go home.

All these details provide a unique perspective into the tragedy. *SCMRPG!* was often criticised for trivialising the shootings, but in fact it humanises them. It places players in the shoes of the boys and offers a glimpse of why did they did it – and then lists them among the tragic losses that day, not as monsters.

Not everyone agrees, of course, with activists like Jack Thompson saying the game blatantly promotes similar actions, training new killers.

> "Beyond the simple platitudes and panaceas of gun control, media ratings/censorship, bully prevention programmes and parental supervision remains a glaring possibility: that the society we have created is deeply moribund. This game asks more of its audience than rudimentary button-pushing and map navigation; it implores introspection."
>
> – *Danny Ledonne,* SCMRPG!*'s creator*



I've seen the horror. Horrors that you've seen.
But you have no right to call me a murderer.
You have no right to call me a murderer.
You have a right to kill me.

There are multiple references to movies, books, music and games that were part of Eric and Dylan's world, like *Apocalypse Now*, *Doom*, Marilyn Manson and even Nietzsche

Things got worse when in 2006 another school shooting happened, this time in Montreal, Canada. Ledonne's game was brought once more into the media's spotlight, as it was revealed that the killer was a fan of violent games, namely *Postal 2*, *Manhunt*, *Max Payne* and *Super Columbine Massacre RPG!*

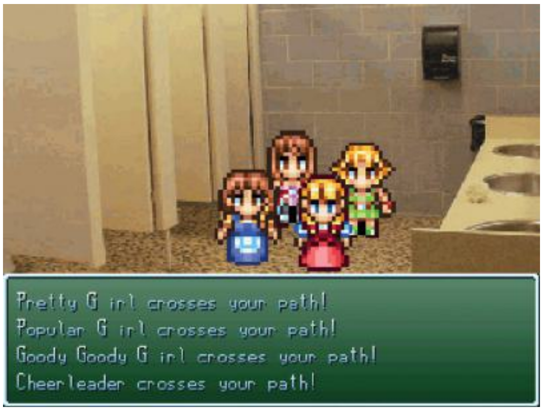
A year later, *SCMRPG!* was chosen as a finalist for the Slamdance Guerrilla Gamemaker Competition. But, in a sudden twist, it was pulled from the contest on alleged "moral obligations". In protest, a group of other competitors – including the developers of *Braid, flOw* and *Castle Crashers* – wrote an open letter to the Slamdance organisers, arguing that the decision was "hurting the legitimacy of games as a form of expression, exploration, and experience".

Outraged by the removal of the game, the jury of the Slamdance Film Festival decided to award the game a Special Jury Prize, this time as a documentary. Once again, the Slamdance organisers vetoed the award.

In the end, more than half of the finalists ended up removing their games from the contest in protest, and Slamdance never hosted a videogame festival again. Danny Ledonne further explored these events with a 2008 documentary titled *Playing Columbine*, focused on the controversy surrounding *SCMRPG!* and the perception of games as children's toys.

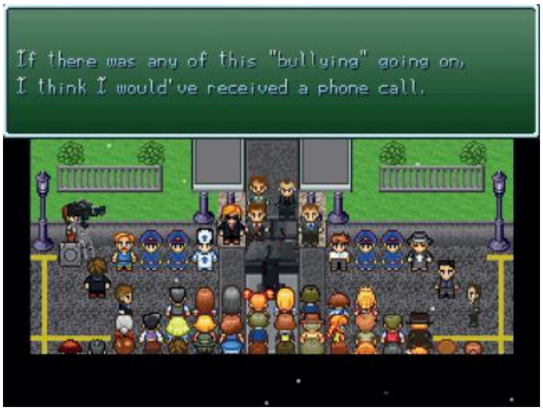
When covering the festival incident in 2007, New York Times reporter Heather Chaplin elegantly wrote "Video Game Tests the Limits. The Limits Win". In hindsight, that was only momentarily true.

Super Columbine Massacre RPG! may have lost the Slamdance award, but it sparked a global debate about the role and value of videogames as media that is still going on today, and inspired other developers to use games to explore serious real-world issues. *SCMRPG!* did break the limits on what games can talk about, and in doing so became one of the most important videogames ever made. **FE**



Pretty Girl crosses your path!
Popular Girl crosses your path!
Goody Goody Girl crosses your path!
Cheerleader crosses your path!

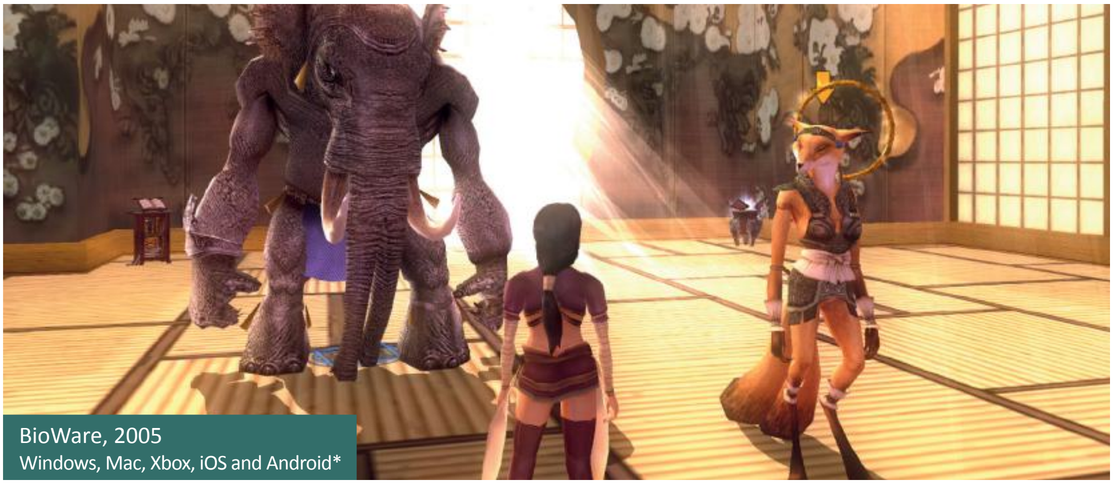
The massacre victims are dehumanised through Eric and Dylan's eyes, seen as nameless stereotypes and cliques



If there was any of this "bullying" going on,
I think I would've received a phone call.

The game ends with various people speaking about the tragedy, each with a different, external target to blame

Jade Empire



BioWare, 2005
Windows, Mac, Xbox, iOS and Android*

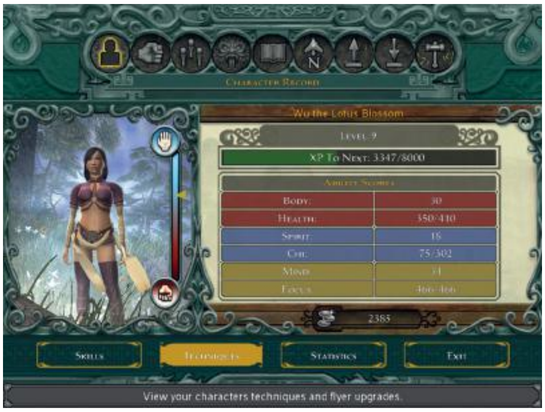
Jade Empire* **was first released for the Xbox in 2005. The Windows port came in 2007, called ***Special Edition*** **and adding extra features. In 2016, BioWare also ported the game to mobile platforms.**

There's a popular saying about good art being about constraints, not about freedom. *Jade Empire* sees BioWare freed from the constraints of the *Dungeons & Dragons* ruleset and setting, as well as from the looming presence of the *Star Wars* canon. The studio had total creative freedom for the first time since *Shattered Steel*, back in 1996.

The result? A mix of wonderful creative invention and dreadful literary excess.

The most striking aspect on display is the game's "wuxia" setting. BioWare's Far Eastern fantasy world is ripe with lore and lush with colour. It's a land of travelling merchants, of martial artists looking to hone their craft, where elements and spirits exert palpable influence in the world. But in mixing and matching from the rich source material, BioWare didn't add enough of its own. The world is a pastiche of influences from Chinese cinema and literature. It is an unusual, underused setting, but it never feels original.

Meanwhile, too many characters are far too eager to dump lore on you for the sake of doing so. *Jade Empire*'s world is likely to bore you into not caring about it before you're done with the first village.



The character system is very simplistic: there are three stats, upgrades to each fighting style, a morality bar and gems that you equip in your magical amulet

If the world-building is tepid, the narrative is anything but. What starts as a familiar "Chosen One" quest leads to one of the best plot twists in gaming. Good twists are the ones where you have the clues to figure them out laid before you, but they surprise you anyway. Twists like this are rare and hard to pull off in games. *Jade Empire* manages it, in what is one of BioWare's finest storytelling moments to date. That it shines despite the filler dialogue and weak voice acting speaks to its strength.

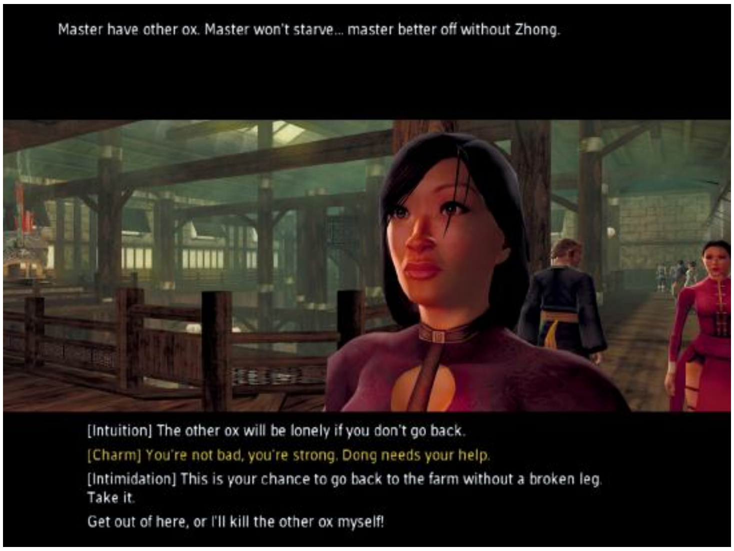
The companion characters, the bread-and-butter of BioWare's modern output, are hit-and-miss. Most talk too much while having very little to say – even the romances feel like a bit of an afterthought. The ones that stand out do so thanks to their quirky personalities. In fact, *Jade Empire* is at its best when it tries to be funny and tongue-in-cheek. But more than any other BioWare RPG, this story is all about you.

Combat-wise, *Jade Empire* sees the company abandoning its usual real-time-with-pause combat for a full action-based system. This feels more natural on a console and would serve as a stepping stone to *Mass Effect*, but the transition wasn't smooth.

When combat starts, the camera zooms out and locks onto an enemy. Then, it's a matter of dodging, strafing, blocking and attacking at the right time – alternating quick, power and area attacks to create combos – often against several opponents. Still, your biggest foe will likely be the game's poor camera.

During your journey, you'll learn over 30 fighting styles. Some vary in speed and strength; others cause status afflictions. A few focus on weapons and elemental magic, and there are even styles that transform you into a giant Toad Demon or a Jade Golem. You can equip up to four at once and switch between them during combat – even midway through combos.

> "One of the things that the designers were looking forward to the most was not having the restrictions of a licence. A licence is really beneficial when it comes to structure and the framework of a game, and you can take a lot from research. *Star Wars* was a great example of that – we were really able to reinterpret it all. However, just to be able to do anything you want, and know that you're not contravening the rules or someone else's idea of how it should all go, is cool."
>
> – *Diarmid Clarke,*
> Jade Empire*'s project director*



Master have other ox. Master won't starve... master better off without Zhong.

[Intuition] The other ox will be lonely if you don't go back.
[Charm] You're not bad, you're strong. Dong needs your help.
[Intimidation] This is your chance to go back to the farm without a broken leg. Take it.
Get out of here, or I'll kill the other ox myself!

Jade Empire offers three different dialogue skills, each tied to one of its stats; the way you solve quests also affect your alignment

Knowing when to use each style makes up the bulk of the combat. The way you finish your combo will determine the kind of energy your defeated foe leaves behind. It can either be Health, Mana or Focus.

The first is self-explanatory; healing and magic attacks consume the second, while Focus fuels weapon fighting styles and your character's *Matrix*-inspired time-slowing ability. This Focus ability is one of the most useful, as the floaty controls and sub-par camera make fights against several opponents a harsh affair.

Character customisation is minimal. You start with a choice of seven pre-made warriors to pick from, and can alter their stats and initial combat styles.

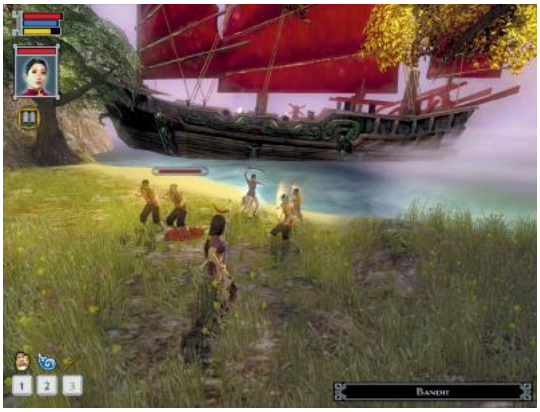
Jade Empire only has three stats, each tied to one of your resource pools. They also double as skill checks during conversations. Loot and equipment management are also heavily streamlined – all you'll find are gems that the main character can affix to their pendant, usually offering simple stat boosts. That's it.

As for exploration, *Jade Empire* is a linear game, with very little to find off the beaten path. Some of the main quests offer several, often diverging paths toward a resolution. The way you choose, in turn, influences other characters and push you towards the Path of the Open Palm or the Path of the Closed Fist – two martial arts philosophies that aim high, but lack nuance and play out as "good" and "evil" alignments.

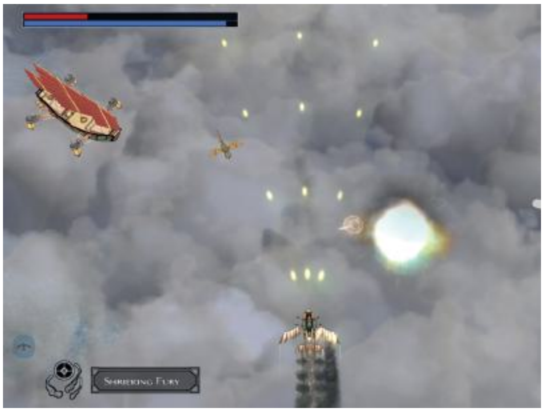
Despite the weak mechanics, the need for an extra dialogue pass, and a lore-dump approach to world-building, *Jade Empire* still retains some charm. Not only is it a chance to adventure in an underused setting, but the art style holds up well, with each area showcasing that Far Eastern mystique. And the central narrative is still BioWare at its finest.

However, the many flaws that players stomached years ago have become harder to forgive today. While the rest of BioWare's catalogue has aged somewhat gracefully, *Jade Empire* has not. **LM**

Those seeking to expand *Jade Empire* can try the *Jade Empire in Style* mod, which adds several new combat styles and rebalances existing ones.

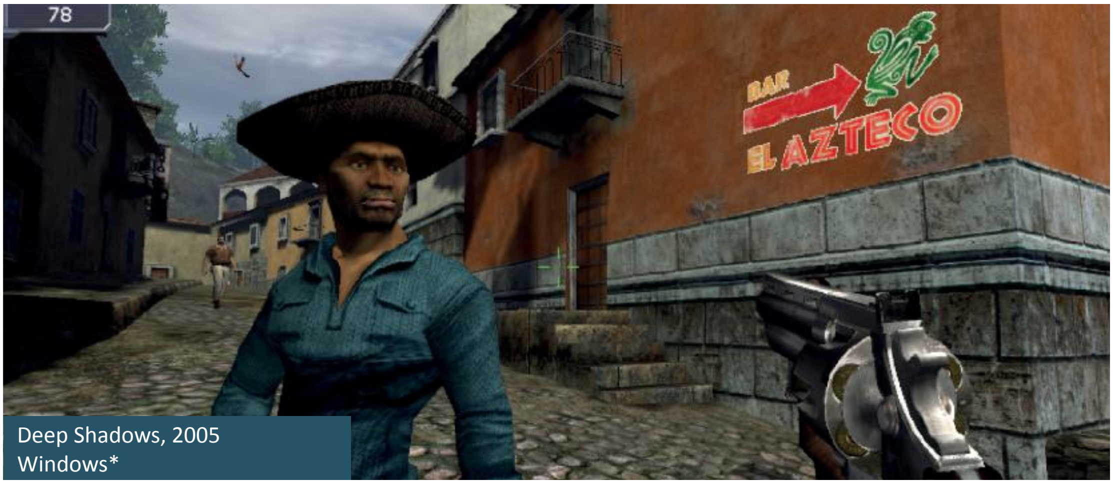


Only one companion will follow you at a time, and you can order them to fight or to support you during combat



When travelling across the world by plane, you'll have the option to play a simple shoot-'em-up mini-game

Boiling Point: Road to Hell



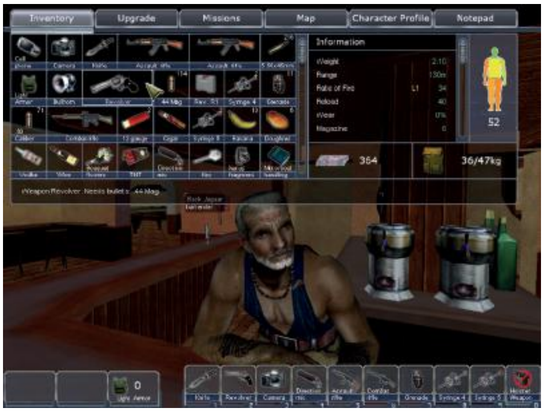
Deep Shadows, 2005
Windows*

*As with the *Baldur's Gate* and *Icewind Dale* games, in 2017 Beamdog released an Enhanced Edition of *Torment*, porting it to modern platforms, adding HD support and recruiting Chris Avellone to help restore some cut content.

In 2001, a small team at Ukrainian studio GSC Game World released *Codename: Outbreak*, a tactical FPS often pointed out as a predecessor to their 2007 hit *STALKER: Shadow of Chernobyl*. But there's another story here: two of its developers, Sergey Zabaryanskiy and Roman Lut, left GSC to start Deep Shadows and create their own FPS/RPG hybrid: *Xenus: Boiling Point*.

Known as *Boiling Point: Road to Hell* in English, this ambitious game has a small studio punching way above its weight, trying to combine *GTA*, *Far Cry* and *Deus Ex* into an immersive open-world FPS/RPG.

The game stars Saul Meyers, a former French soldier who flies to Colombia in search of his missing daughter (the English translation changes the country to a fictional one, Realia). To advance his search he'll constantly need to pay people for information and assistance, so you'll spend most of the game doing side-quests to raise money in order to progress the story. As a mercenary, Saul can work for any of the factions clashing all over the country: the Colombian army, a communist guerrilla, a drug cartel, bandits, indigenous tribes, the CIA and the civilians.



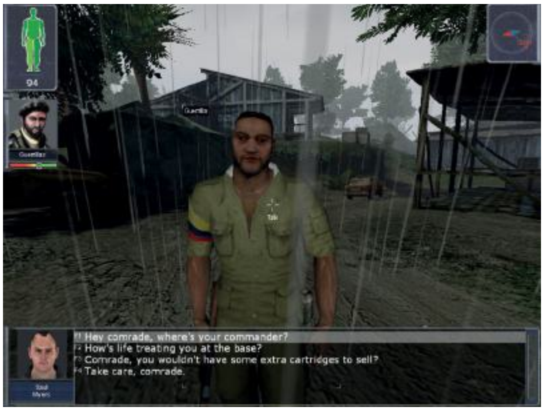
Besides faction reputations and improve-by-use skills, *Boiling Point*'s character system also has survival elements, as Saul gets injured and tired, weapons wear down, and healing items make you addicted, reducing their effectiveness

While *Boiling Point* has a few stats that improve with use, there are no social skills or complex dialogues – its role-playing is based on how you deal with the factions. Joining the communists means cheap ammo and free medicine, but the better-equipped army soldiers will hunt you from helicopters! Killing soldiers improves your standing with the cartel, bandits and communists, but what will you do if the cartel asks you to steal guerrilla weapons for a lot of money?

All this happens in a large, seamless open world, which Saul can explore by car, boat, helicopter or plane. It's mostly taken up by featureless jungles, but also has towns, villas, markets and military bases, all with NPCs offering quests that range from fun gags to deadly battles via fetch quests. The difficulty spikes can be frustrating, and the fetch quests are the worst offenders, forcing you to drive for hours and hours across the jungle. This repetition, the eternal grind for cash and a buggy release gave *Boiling Point* a rather bad "eurojank" reputation.

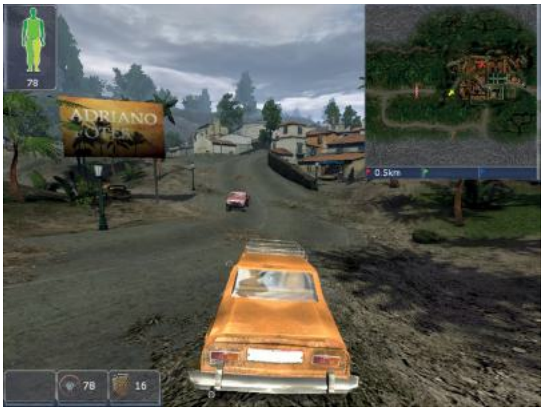
Still, it was successful enough to get a sequel: *Xenus II: White Gold* (a.k.a. *White Gold: War in Paradise*), which sends Saul back to Latin America to investigate cocaine packages that are killing their users. The seven factions are back, and the game is now set in a large archipelago, with more guns and vehicles, a parachute, and more interesting environments, NPCs and quests.

The character system changed from improve-by-use to a perk system, also adding stealth, lock-picking and persuasion skills (with very limited utility), while the overall gameplay is more lighthearted and arcade-like, with faster movement and less punishing combat. While a more accessible game, *White Gold* still suffers from the constant grind for money and a general lack of polish – the English translation and voice acting are terrible, its initial release was buggy and it has an end-game difficulty spike that will stop most players.

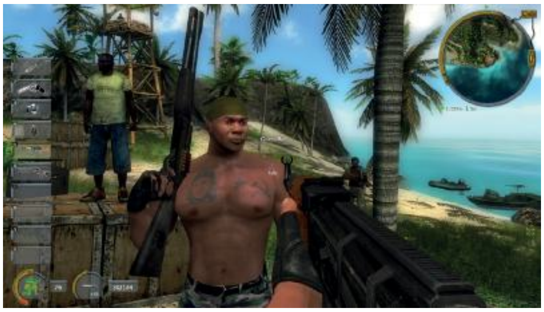


1 Hey comrade, where's your commander?
2 How's life treating you at the base?
3 Comrade, you wouldn't have some extra cartridges to sell?
4 Take care, comrade.

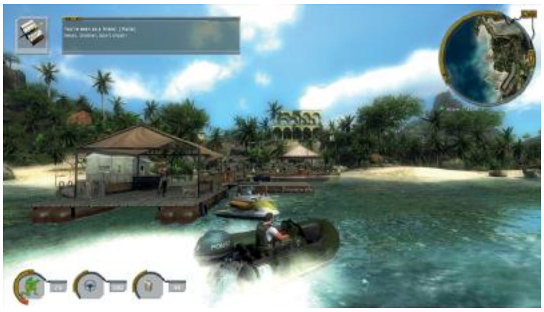
When meeting any character, the game checks your current reputation with their faction and acts accordingly



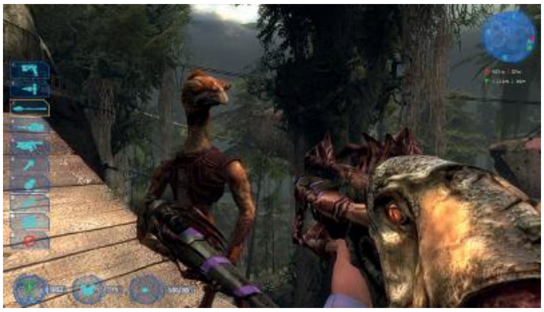
Boiling Point has two towns, but you'll spend a lot of time driving across its jungles, evading battles and ambushes



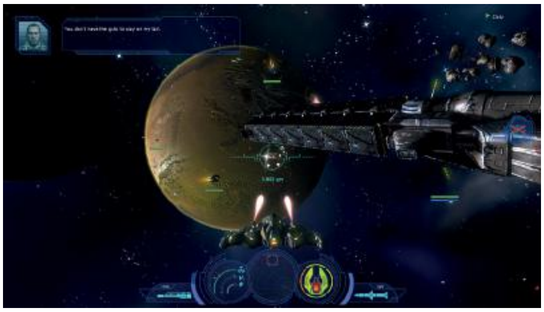
White Gold presented a giant graphical leap, offering far more interesting environments and a diverse cast of characters



An ocean replaces the jungles of *Boiling Point*, but fails to offer anything meaningful to do when sailing between islands



The Precursors adds alien species and weapons, but the planets you explore are mostly barren jungles or deserts



The space sim element of *The Precursors* is impressive in its ambition, but lacks in depth and purpose

It's still an enjoyable game but, while its release was in 2008, the English version came only in 2010, and only on the online store GamersGate – meaning most English-speaking players never even heard of it. An Xbox 360 port was also planned, but never released.

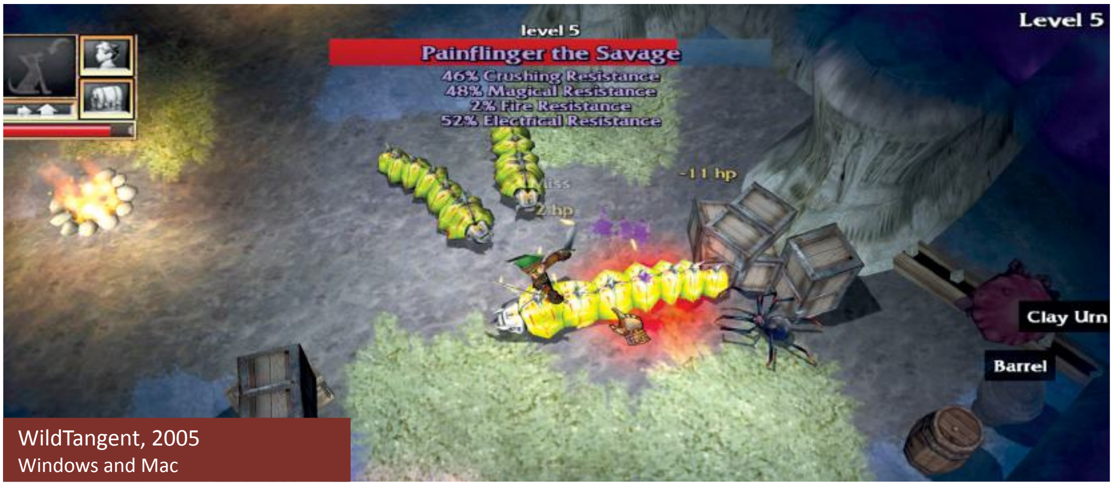
Even with all these setbacks, Deep Shadows' ambition continued: while working on *White Gold* they were also doing *The Precursors* (2009), an epic sci-fi RPG. *Precursors* is basically *White Gold* in space: its core gameplay and even UI are the same, but now there's a full Space Sim in it – you can pilot a spaceship, mine asteroids, trade resources at space stations, fight pirates or raid cargo ships in order to raise money.

Despite this bold new addition, *Precursors* is the weakest of Deep Shadows' games. It promises an entire galaxy, but there's very little actual content or depth. There's only six planets to explore – three being very tiny, the other three being barren and filled with repetitive fetch quests. The faction system was cut to just two sides per planet, and the combat is extremely frustrating thanks to poorly-implemented energy shields.

The writing also reaches its lowest point, mostly just teasing the player and ending in a huge cliffhanger, setting up a sequel that never came – its commercial failure ended Deep Shadows' ambitious RPG dreams, forcing them to shift to casual hidden object games. **FE**

***Boiling Point* got two fan-made expansions, *The Legend Alive* and *Great War*, but they're only available in Russian.**

Fate


level 5
Painflinger the Savage
46% Crushing Resistance
48% Magical Resistance
2% Fire Resistance
52% Electrical Resistance
Level 5
-11 hp
Clay Urn
Barrel

WildTangent, 2005
Windows and Mac

Fate had humble beginnings, born an accessible yet deep *Diablo* clone developed in a mere five months. The game was quite successful, leading to four stand-alone versions: the original 2005 game, *Fate: Undiscovered Realms* in 2008, *Fate: The Traitor Soul* in 2009 and *Fate: The Cursed King* in 2011. Each release adds new content and features, but the game itself is basically the same: a *Diablo*-like dungeon crawler with one town and an endless dungeon under it.

You can find a handy archive of *Fate*'s mods and tools, plus guides on how to set them up at www.surdin.net/archive.

Each game offers a wide variety of monsters, random dungeons and an endless diversity of suffix/prefix-constructed loot. In each dungeon, you'll need to finish one random main quest to win (usually killing a boss at a deep level), and in the process you'll complete many randomly generated side-quests.

What differentiates *Fate* from most *Diablo* clones is the ability to adventure infinitely: there's no level-up limit and dungeons are endless: you can descend lower and lower, gaining more and more powerful loot and fulfilling new random quests. After finishing the main quest you can retire your hero, creating an "inheritance" to be given to his descendant in the next game.

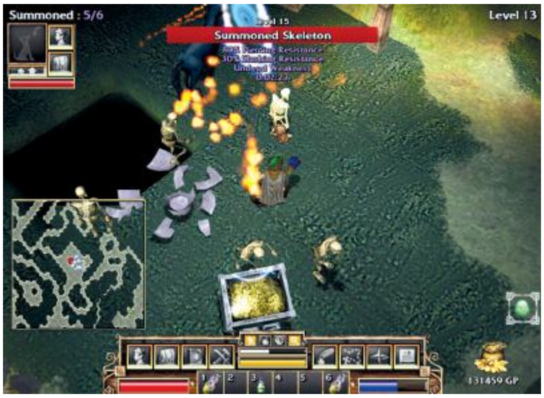
The character system is quite straightforward, with several stats and skills that can be upgraded at level-up. The different races (added in *Traitor Soul*) differ only in initial parameters and appearance. What really defines your hero is your equipment and spells, so you can tune your playstyle freely.

Other features include a gambler, an equipment enchanter and a pet – initially a cat or dog, but you can transform it into a much more powerful monster by feeding it fish. Ah, yes, fishing! You can fish for progressively more powerful fishes and items.

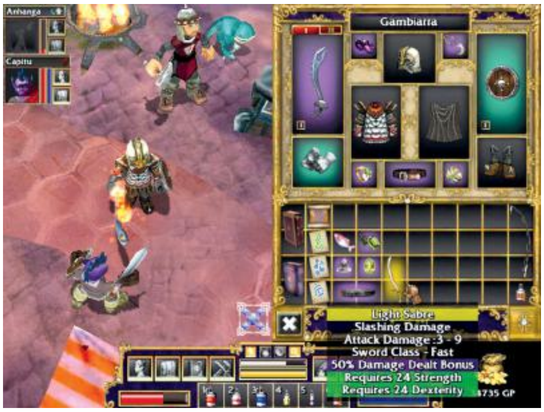
If all this feels familiar, it's because *Fate*'s creator, Travis Baldree, later also worked on *Torchlight* (2009), taking most of *Fate*'s features with him.

Another shared trait is the extensive modding, with fans adding a lot of content, gameplay tweaks, changing monster density, camera controls, etc.

Unfortunately, *Fate* has one big issue: it's not pretty. Graphics are quite simple, muddy and have barely been improved in the subsequent versions. Yet, while *Torchlight* might be more polished, the infinite randomness of *Fate* is worth trying for those who can overlook graphics in favour of addictive gameplay. **SS**


Summoned : 5/6
Level 13
Summoned Skeleton
131459 GP

Fate was designed as a casual-friendly mix of *Diablo* and Roguelikes, with an art style that tries to be cute without being childish


Gambiarra
Light Sabre
Slashing Damage
Attack Damage : 3 - 9
Sword Class - Fast
50% Damage Dealt Bonus
Requires 24 Strength
Requires 24 Dexterity
1735 GP

Each new version keeps the core gameplay but adds content and features, such as more pets, new player races and recruitable NPCs

Titan Quest

Iron Lore Entertainment, 2006
Windows

Mythological RPGs are surprisingly rare, but *Titan Quest* does its best to make up for that. As a Greek hero trying to find the source of a monster infestation, you'll travel across Greece, Egypt, the Silk Road and China, then climb Olympus, descend into Hades and cross the Bifrost into Valhalla. No one can say this is "just another *Diablo* clone".

Alongside the mythological setting, *Titan Quest*'s defining feature is its character system. Instead of classes, the game has eight masteries (ten with the expansions), each with its own skill tree. The trick is that each character can learn up to two masteries. So you could pick the Earth mastery, which specialises in AoE spells, and play a pure caster. Combine it with the Defence mastery to increase survivability or with the Storm mastery for more single-target spells, and so on. It's a deep and fascinating system that allows for 55 different mastery combinations, plus the variations from your choices within each individual skill tree.

Each mastery was supposed to be tied to a god, but higher-ups asked the developers to avoid controversial and religious themes, leading to a mythological game that doesn't fully explore its setting. This, the low game difficulty and the simplistic loot system can make the game feel underwhelming at times. On the other hand, the 6-player co-op definitely makes it stand out.

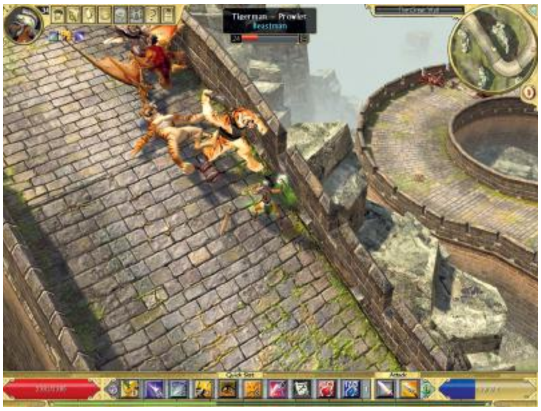
Another great feature is the visually stunning landmarks, like Athens, the Great Wall of China or the Pyramid of Giza. However, unlike other *Diablo*-like games, the world of *TQ* is static – enemies and areas are always the same, greatly reducing its replay value.

This is made worse by the game's difficulty system, which you must complete twice to unlock the highest difficulty setting (which has additional bosses and items). This was how *Diablo II* worked, but *Titan Quest* is a longer game and doesn't have the same replayability.

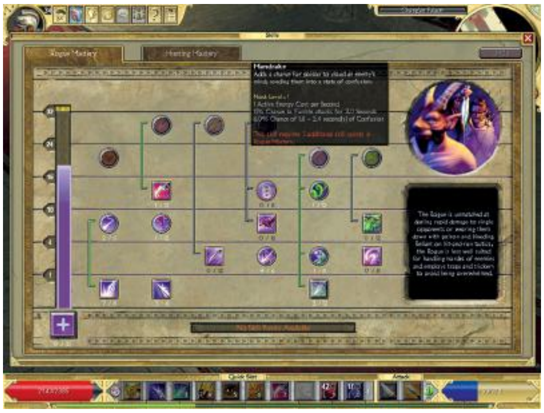
Iron Lore closed down after releasing the *Immortal Throne* expansion in 2007, but THQ Nordic remastered the game in 2016 and released the *Ragnarök*, *Atlantis* and *Eternal Embers* expansions. These add even more length to an overly long game, making them a fans-only deal.

Instead, those looking for a fresh take on *Titan Quest*'s mastery system might enjoy *Grim Dawn* (2016), a great action RPG by the original *TQ* developers, which employs the same engine and many similar features. **FE**

***Titan Quest* has great support for modding, leading to popular mods such as *Diablo 2 Lilith*, which adds *Diablo II*'s classes and a new world, or *Soulvizier*, which expands the game with new classes, monsters and items.**

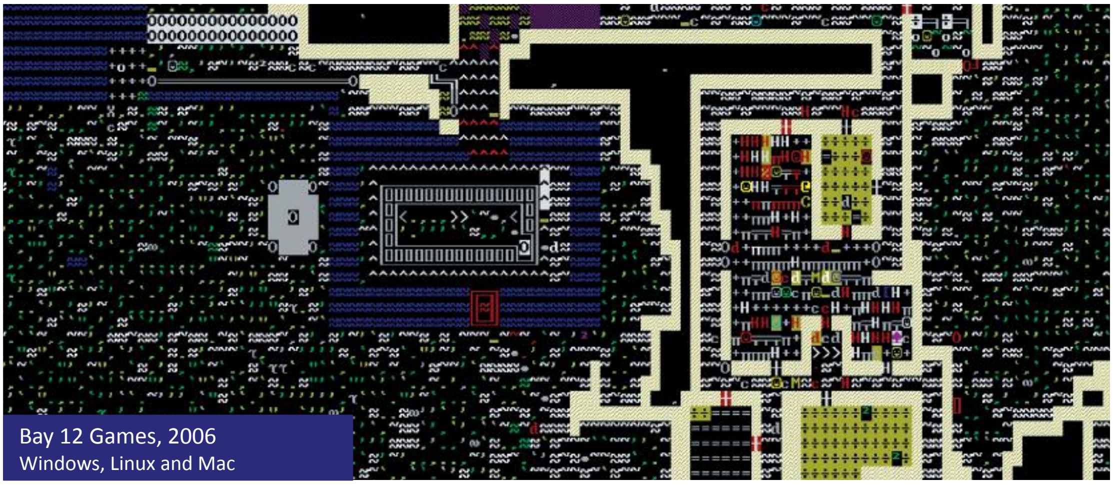


Titan Quest makes great use of iconic landmarks like the Great Wall of China, but these are interconnected by generic areas that can drag on for far too long



You can spend points learning and improving skills, or use them to level up the mastery itself, earning stat boosts and unlocking more powerful skills

Dwarf Fortress



Bay 12 Games, 2006
Windows, Linux and Mac

In your typical Tolkien-esque fantasy world, plenty of favour is given to the elves, the halflings, even the humans. But *Dwarf Fortress* is a game that will make you fall in love with the dwarves.

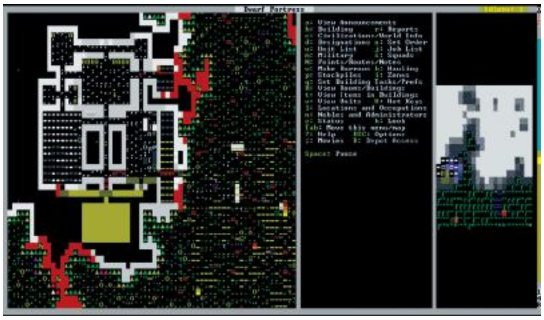
***Dwarf Fortress'* full official name is *Slaves to Armok: God of Blood - Chapter II: Dwarf Fortress*. The game is a "sequel" to *Slaves to Armok: God of Blood*, a 3D Roguelike Tarn Adams created in the early 2000s.**

The game is freeware, developed almost entirely by Tarn Adams, with help from his brother Zach. The first alpha build released in 2006, and, after ten years in development, it still isn't exactly "finished". But while games usually suffer in the face of such a long development time, *Dwarf Fortress* has only become a greater, more complete experience over time.

There are two play modes to the game, and they function very differently. The first is Fortress Mode, which plays much like a real-time strategy game or a management/sim game, and gives the player the run of an entire fortress full of dwarves, giving them instructions on what to build and how to survive.

The other is Adventure Mode, in which the player controls a single character (not necessarily a dwarf) and freely travels through an open world, taking quests, slaying monsters and collecting items, much as in a traditional Roguelike.

What really sets *Dwarf Fortress* apart is the staggering depth and complexity of its systems – it may be the most mechanically complex game ever.



In Fortress Mode you assign tasks such as "dig this wall", and dwarves with the appropriate professions will perform them

Take world generation for example. The first thing a player must do upon starting the game is have a random world generated. This world is formed with surprising realism. Mountain ranges form in realistic lines, rivers will flow across the land, carving out fertile valleys, and rain shadows will form deserts on the far sides of mountain ranges.

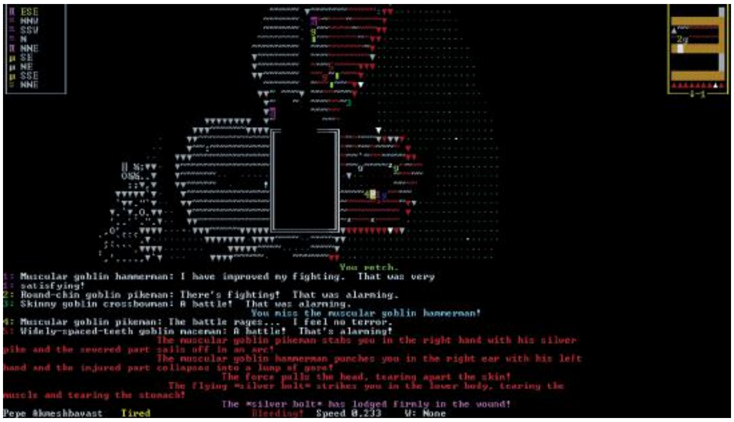
Then an extensive history for this world will be generated, with civilisations rising and falling, titans raiding towns, wars being waged, heroes appearing, etc. This will all be reflected in the factions that visit your fortress, and in the areas your hero can explore.

Physics also plays a prominent role in the game's functionality. In a seemingly simple action, such as a dwarf swinging a hammer at a goblin, so many factors come into play. The game will consider the force of the dwarf's swing, the quality and material of the dwarf's hammer (a silver one would be heavier than a copper one, and therefore more effective), the thickness and quality of any armour the goblin may be wearing (which is also dependent on the specific body part struck), how many layers of armour and clothing there may be, the thickness of the goblin's skin, muscles and bones, and more.

Through all of this, the game subverts typical damage-tracking in the form of hit points, and instead uses a broader, somewhat more vague system in which body parts may be bruised, cut, broken, mangled to various degrees, or lopped off entirely. On top of all that, the game also considers any cut arteries, severed nerves and even the character's personality.

Discussing all the game's mechanics requires an entire book (and indeed there are books and even theses on them), but, thanks to the interplay between these systems, one of the biggest draws to *Dwarf Fortress* is that it's a great storytelling game.

> "We have story analysis stuff we do to plan the game, where we write a short story, just some typical fantasy story, and be like, 'What makes this story interesting? Where are the inflection points that really turn it into a narrative that pops out of it?' We want that to happen when people are playing the game. We want them to have something they can hold onto and then tell their friends."
>
> *– Tarn "Toady" Adams, Dwarf Fortress' creator*



```
                                        You watch.
1: Muscular goblin hammerman: I have improved my fighting.  That was very
1: satisfying!
2: Round-chin goblin pikeman: There's fighting!  That was alarming.
3: Skinny goblin crossbowman: A battle!  That was alarming.
                         You miss the muscular goblin hammerman!
4: Muscular goblin pikeman: The battle rages...  I feel no terror.
5: Widely-spaced-teeth goblin maceman: A battle!  That's alarming!
                The muscular goblin pikeman stabs you in the right hand with his silver
pike and the severed part sails off in an arc!
                The muscular goblin hammerman punches you in the right ear with his left
hand and the injured part collapses into a lump of gore!
                      The force pulls the head, tearing apart the skin!
                 The flying *silver bolt* strikes you in the lower body, tearing the
muscle and tearing the stomach!
                      The *silver bolt* has lodged firmly in the wound!
Pepe Akmeshbavast   Tired                Bleeding!  Speed 0.233   W: None
```

Adventure Mode stands out from other Roguelikes due to its simulationist approach: combat, NPC dialogue and even enemy behaviour all feel dynamic and unique

This isn't to say that the game has a well-written narrative, or really much of a written narrative at all. Rather, every person who plays *Dwarf Fortress* comes out of the experience with their own unique story. You may dig too deep, find an ancient beast, kill it, or see your fortress infected by a disease spread by the beast's blood. Or perhaps play as a bold, brash elven hero who loses a leg in battle but still roams the land, wielding a sword in one hand, a crutch in the other.

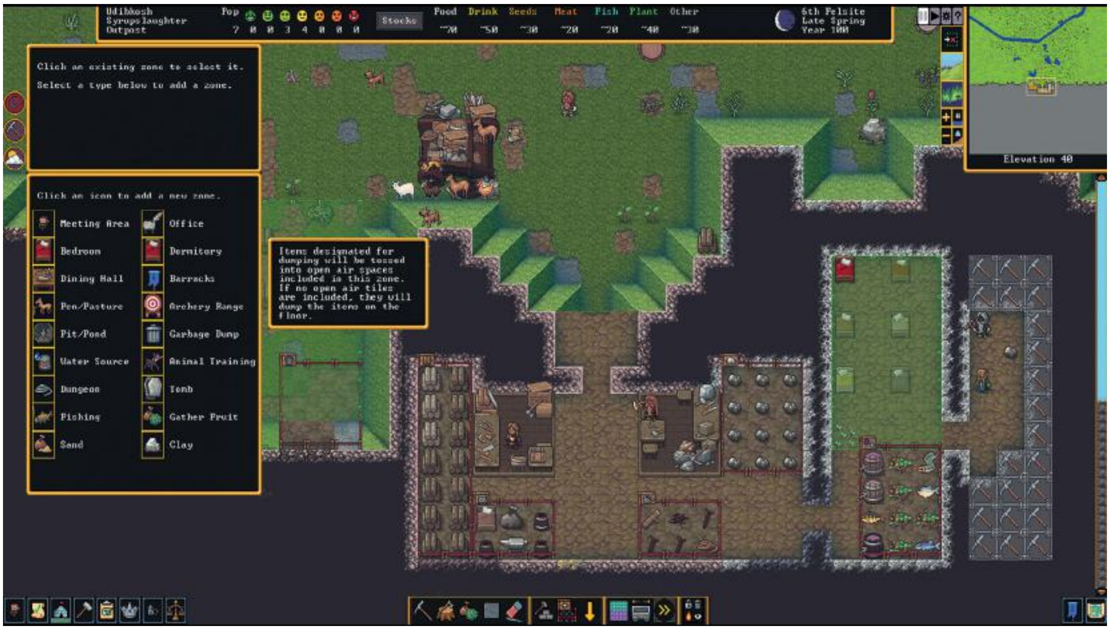
The game is also notorious for its graphics and control scheme, which many new players find all but impenetrable. The game uses an ASCII tileset, representing every creature and object in the game as a Unicode character. It also relies heavily on hotkeys, a control scheme normally reserved for advanced players. For years the community tried to address this with mods that add graphical tilesets and an improved UI.

That all changed in 2019 when it was announced the game would get a premium version with friendly visuals, mouse-driven controls and even a tutorial. *Dwarf Fortress*' astonishing depth comes from these almost two decades of tireless development. The first release didn't even allow for multiple Z-levels; the whole game was limited to a two-dimensional plane.

In 2011, Tarn Adams stated that the game could very well be in development for another 20 years and still not reach version 1.0. And even then, he would probably keep updating it, in his pursuit of simulating the "narratively interesting parts of existence".

Although it may never be entirely finished, the importance of *Dwarf Fortress* is undeniable. It stands as a one-of-a-kind game that achieved a rare, perfect balance between procedurally-generated elements and the importance of player input. **TT**

The graphical version of *Dwarf Fortress* released in 2022 is paid, but the developers are still maintaining a free Classic version with ASCII graphics. You can get it on Bay 12's website.



Click on an existing zone to select it.

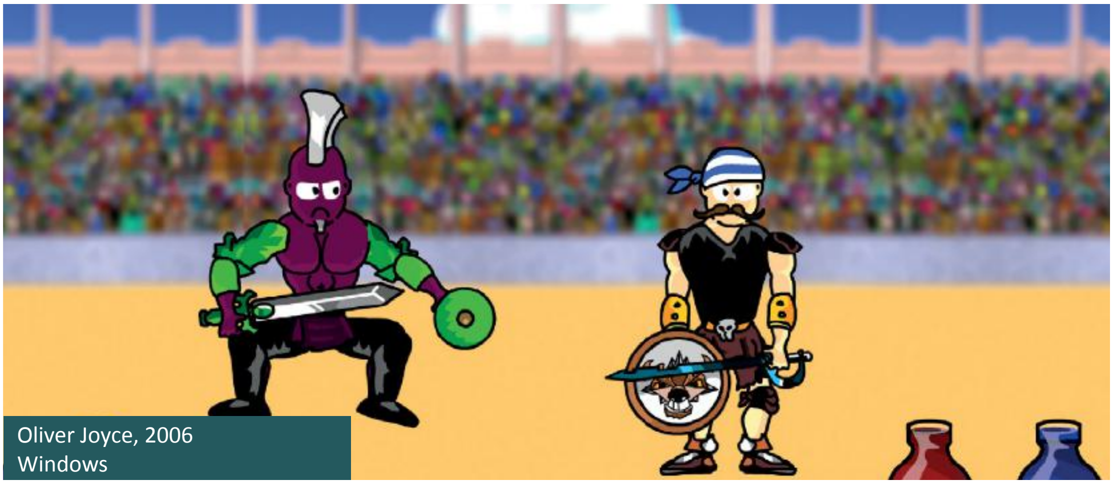
Select a type below to add a zone.

Click an icon to add a new zone.

Items designated for dumping will be tossed into open air spaces included in this zone. If no open air tiles are included, they will dump the items on the floor.

The new, premium version of *Dwarf Fortress* successfully changed the game from a seemingly-impenetrable task to something a total beginner can start playing and slowly master

Swords and Sandals: Gladiator



Oliver Joyce, 2006
Windows

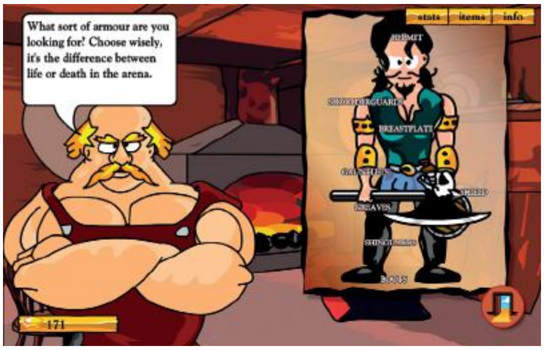
In 2013 Oliver Joyce founded Whiskeybarrel Games. He is still working on new games for the series, with *Sword and Sandals Immortals* being released on Early Access in 2023.

The mid-2000s was when Flash games began to break into the mainstream, with games like *N* (2005), *Dad 'n Me* (2005) and *Line Rider* (2006) earning awards and headlines across the world. It was also the rise of online game portals, offering thousands of Flash games (sometimes licensed, often stolen) for users to play freely, earning ad revenue from page views.

Popular among these early Flash games were combat-focused RPGs like *AdventureQuest* (2002) and *Sinjid Battle Arena* (2003), in which you fight a series of turn-based battles, earning XP and gold to prepare for the next fight. Among these, the *Swords and Sandals* series would dominate online game portals.

The core of its combat is quite simple: characters can move forward or backwards, charge, taunt and attack. Quick attacks are easier to land but deal less damage; heavy attacks are the opposite. Each action drains stamina, which can be recovered by resting. It's easy to learn and presented in a very accessible way.

Stats play a central role, so a character with low agility will walk slowly, while an agile one can close large distances in a single leap. If you lose a fight, your character gets deleted, so there's an addicting, Roguelike aspect of trying different builds and competing with friends.


What sort of armour are you looking for? Choose wisely, it's the difference between life or death in the arena.
stats
items
info
HELMET
SHOULDERGUARDS
BREASTPLATE
GAUNTLETS
SHIELD
GREAVES
SHINGUARDS
BOOTS
171

The shops in town sell weapons and armour, all of which are all linear upgrades, but the visual presentation makes it gratifying to see your gladiator get better equipped

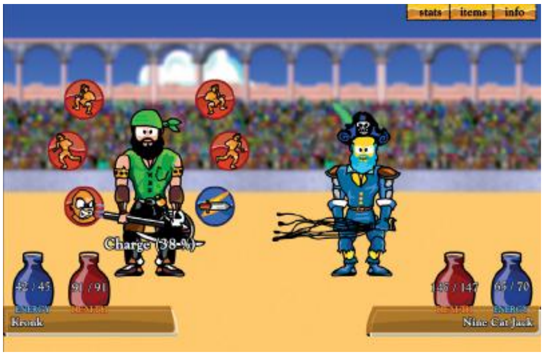
The sequel, *Swords and Sandals 2: Emperor's Reign* (2007) expanded the game, offering more interesting playstyles and challenges. In the first game it was easy to win by focusing only on damage, but now a slow brute can be easily destroyed by a gladiator with a ranged weapon or a spellcaster. It also added the ability to use special attacks, enchant your weapons, buy potions and entertain the arena's audience to earn better rewards.

The full game required a paid subscription at the Playaholics game portal, and was quite long and grindy, with hundreds of battles and dozens of arena masters. But the free demo was a short and satisfying challenge that became extremely popular across other portals, with crazy numbers like 37 million plays at Y8.com.

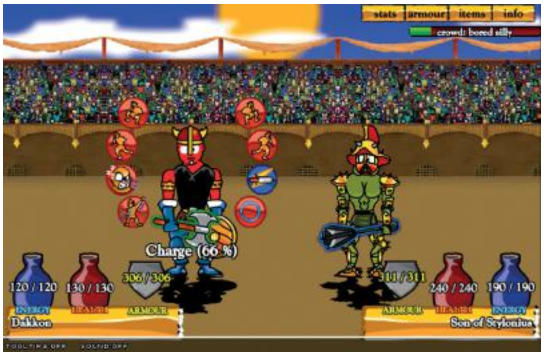
The third game, *Swords & Sandals III: Solo Ultratus* (2008), introduced a new art style and different races, more weapon and armour types and a large cast of unique arena champions to defeat, such as cyborgs and demons. Moreover, the game now has four skill trees, split into melee, ranged, magical and survival skills.

Focused on players that would enjoy all this depth and try to defeat every champion (hopefully paying for the full game), *Solo Ultratus* embraced min-maxing and lost some of the accessibility of the first two games, especially on its menus. Still, it was a very popular title, and got a multiplayer version called *Multiplae Ultratus.*

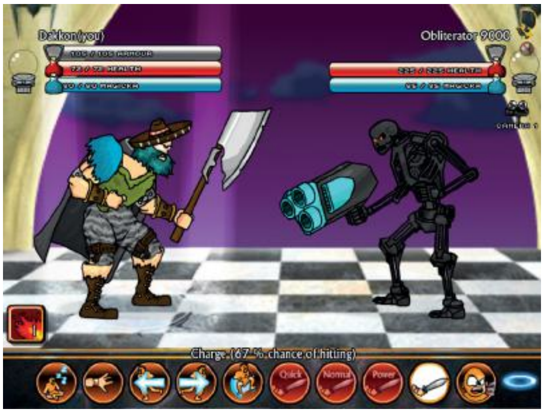
After exhausting the arena battles, the series then began to diversify itself with several spin-offs – *S&S: Crusader* (2008) is a simple strategy game based around army battles; *S&S IV: Tavern Quests* (2009) became a multiplayer boardgame similar to *Mario Party*; *S&S: Mini Fighters* (2011) marked the end of the Flash age and the shift to mobile; *S&S: Medieval* (2017) moved the series to the middle ages; *S&S: Pirates!* (2018) is a competition against other pirates to rule the seas and *S&S: Spartacus* (2019) is a side-scrolling action game.


stats
items
info
Charge (38 %)
42 / 45
91 / 91
145 / 147
65 / 70
ENERGY
HEALTH
Krusik
Nine Cat Jack

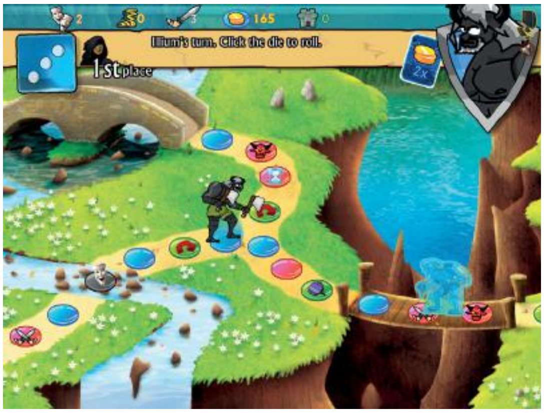
Swords and Sandals I: Gladiator has you fight randomly generated gladiators and seven unique arena champions


stats
armour
items
info
crowd: bored stiff
Charge (66 %)
120 / 120
130 / 130
306 / 306
311 / 311
240 / 240
190 / 190
ENERGY
HEALTH
ARMOUR
Dakkon
Son of Stylonius

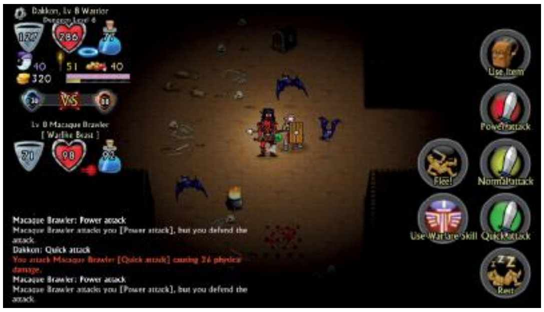
Swords and Sandals II: Emperor's Reign greatly polished and expanded the gameplay, becoming the most popular entry


Dakkon (you)
Obliterator 9000
Charge (67 % chance of hitting)
Quick
Normal
Power

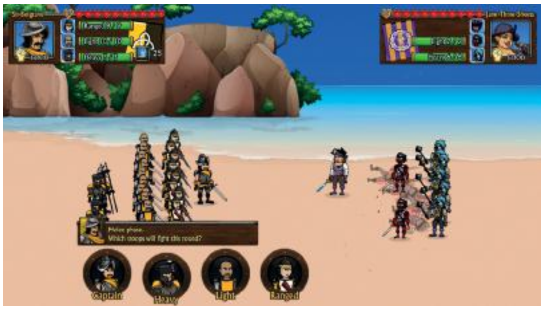
S&S III: Solo Ultratus changed the art style, allowing for more character customisation and unique enemies


165
1st place
2x

S&S IV: Tavern Quests was a radical departure, becoming a multiplayer boardgame like *Mario Party,* full of minigames


Dakkon, Lv 8 Warrior
VS
Lv 8 Macaque Brawler
[Warlike Beast]
Use Item
PowerAttack
Flee!
NormalAttack
Use Warfare Skill
QuickAttack
Rest
Macaque Brawler: Power attack
Dakkon: Quick attack
Macaque Brawler: Power attack

S&S V: Grail of Antares added dungeon exploration, somewhat similar to that in Roguelikes, but with static enemies


Captain
Heavy
Light
Ranged

S&S: Pirates! combines elements from all previous games with base building, army battles, ship battles and duels

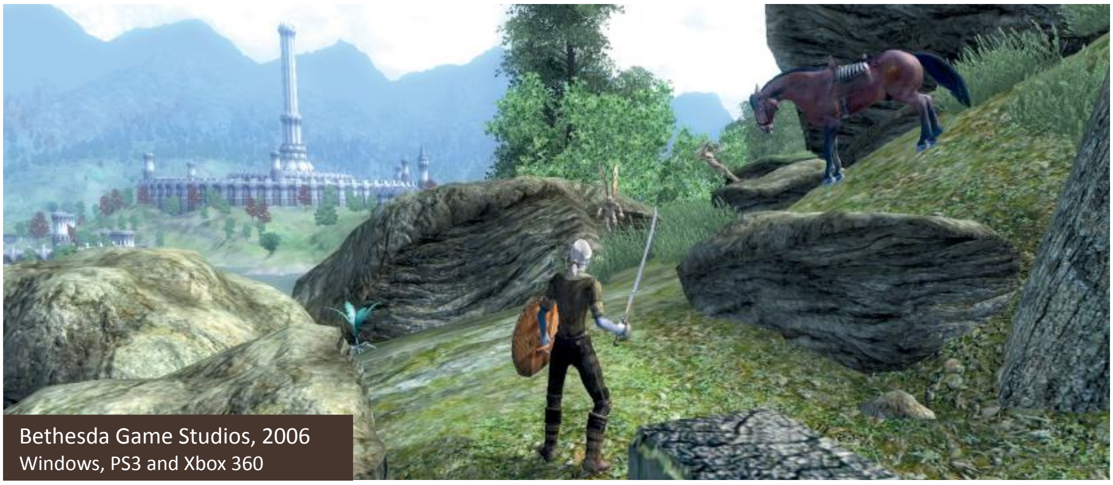
Since 2017, the developer has been re-releasing the games on Steam, remastering some of them as "Redux" versions. This includes previously mobile-only entries like *S&S V: Grail of Antares* (2012), which combines the arena battles with turn-based dungeon exploration.

The reception of these remasters has been mixed, as they suffer from inconsistent art styles, balance issues and newly introduced bugs. While the originals were also very flawed, these issues were easier to overlook in a 2006 Flash game. With Flash now dead, the best way to revisit the series is the 2019 *S&S: Classic Collection*.

Overall, *Swords and Sandals* holds a weird spot in history: it was more popular than the vast majority of games (in 2010 its website claimed the series had over 350 million plays across multiple game portals), but most people only played the demos. It was the perfect game for its era, but it's hard to define its legacy.

Of course, much of its appeal was tied to its accessibility, novelty and the fact that anyone with Internet access could play it. Nonetheless, there's a solid core gameplay loop underneath it, and a certain earnest charm that only Flash-era games can provide. **FE**

The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion



Bethesda Game Studios, 2006
Windows, PS3 and Xbox 360

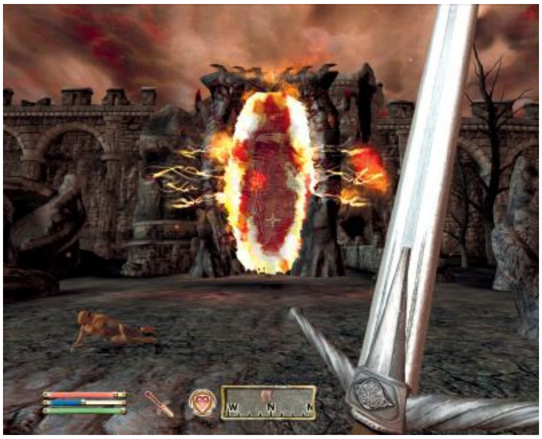
Oblivion represents a fundamental change in core audience for the venerable *Elder Scrolls* franchise. While this was a series born on the PC platform, *Morrowind* was a trailblazer that opened up the console audience to a new type of RPG. Instead of the generally linear and narrative-driven Japanese RPGs that defined this type of game on consoles, *The Elder Scrolls* games were about an open world, which involved crafting your own character and story.

Oblivion was among the first games to use the Xbox 360's marketplace to sell DLCs. It was harshly criticised for charging $2.50 dollars for a set of cosmetic horse armour, which became a term associated with overpriced DLCs in games.

To this end, *Oblivion* placed pumping up production value as its first and foremost priority. The game had a cutting-edge physics system whereby objects could be moved around and thrown, very high 3D graphical fidelity, full voice acting, a realistic action combat system and many other features.

While none of the production values here were peaks for the industry, the fact that they managed so high a quality across a game of such size was nothing short of remarkable from a development perspective.

But this was also the time of soaring development costs. Such investment enforces commercialism from the top down without skipping a beat.



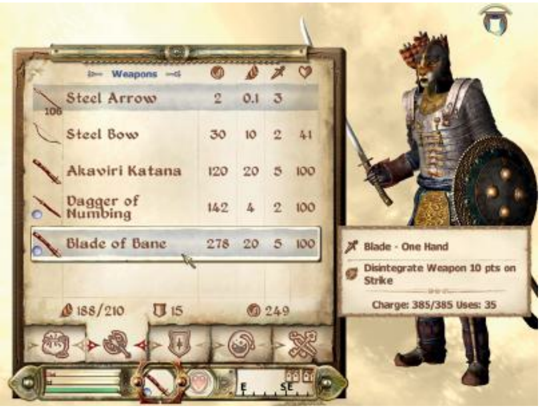
An oblivion gate, which leads to one of the hellish Daedric planes; while interesting at first, these dungeons quickly grow repetitive

Gone is the unique oriental influence of *Morrowind* that saw it being populated with alien mushroom landscapes and complex political intrigue. Instead we are back in the safe embrace of token Tolkien European fantasy, complete with wolves, goblins and evil demons to slay. If only this was the only misstep.

Voice acting meant that the text was pruned extensively, much of it being to the point and related to whatever current quest the player is on. The days of stopping a passer-by to talk about the local news, geography of the land and political upheaval are gone. And though Patrick Stewart was advertised as providing the voice of the Emperor, this proved to be a marketing ruse, since he dies in the tutorial; the rest of the game uses a small cast, leading to uncanny-valley moments in which both participants in a conversation have the same voice.

This stripping away of complexities applies to the world and story as well: hellish portals appear across the land because the Emperor and his entire magical bloodline have been assassinated. But said land is mostly unaffected by this event. The side-content focuses on mundane dangers like bandits or other unrelated world threats. It's downright bizarre to hear the population express just minor concern over what is supposed to be the end of the world, according to religious canon.

For all these faults though, it must be said that the quest design did significantly improve; in fact, it's one of the areas in which the title excels. While lacking the context of *Morrowind*'s quests, which were more about the setting and political intrigue, *Oblivion* provides excellent opportunities for adventures, such as exorcising a haunted manor bought cheap or travelling through someone's mind to wake them up. The Dark Brotherhood assassination quests in particular are some of the best in the series.



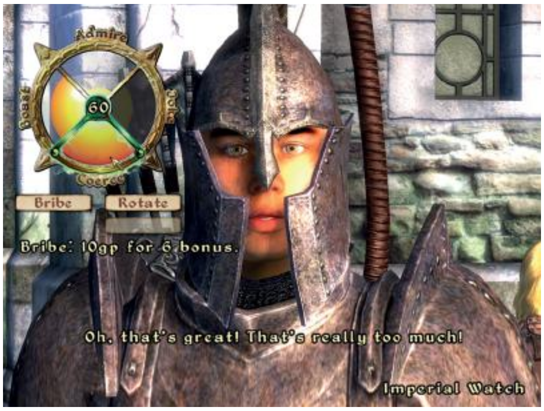
Weapons				
Steel Arrow	2	0.1	3	
Steel Bow	30	10	2	41
Akaviri Katana	120	20	5	100
Dagger of Numbing	142	4	2	100
Blade of Bane	278	20	5	100

Blade - One Hand

Disintegrate Weapon 10 pts on Strike

Charge: 385/385 Uses: 35

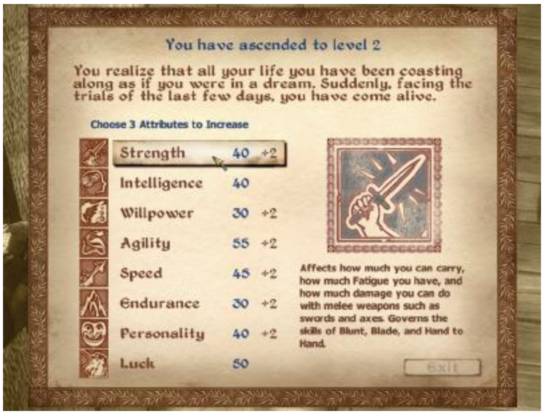
A radical departure from *Morrowind's* customisable UI, *Oblivion's* interface is list-based and designed for consoles



Bribe: 10gp for 6 bonus.

Oh, that's great! That's really too much!

Oblivion added two mini-games: a reflex-based one for lock-picking and a crude logic puzzle for speechcraft



You have ascended to level 2

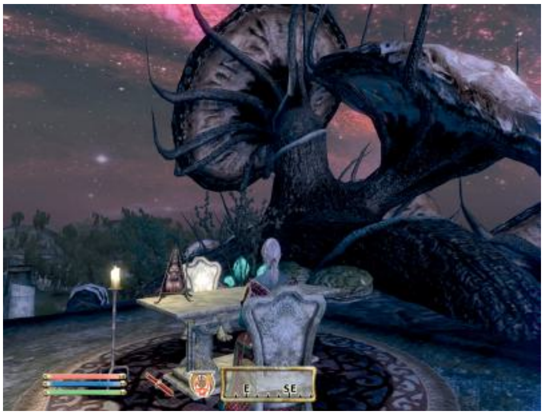
You realize that all your life you have been coasting along as if you were in a dream. Suddenly, facing the trials of the last few days, you have come alive.

Choose 3 Attributes to Increase

Strength	40	+2
Intelligence	40	
Willpower	30	+2
Agility	55	+2
Speed	45	+2
Endurance	30	+2
Personality	40	+2
Luck	50	

Affects how much you can carry, how much Fatigue you have, and how much damage you can do with melee weapons such as swords and axes. Governs the skills of Blunt, Blade, and Hand to Hand.

Many of the old-school RPG elements were streamlined, but others were kept intact, resulting in an uneven game



The *Shivering Isles* expansion moves away from generic European fantasy, sending you into a plane of madness

Gameplay-wise, *Oblivion* uses an action combat system with realistic hit detection, a clear departure from the statistical combat hidden by faux animations from the previous games. While this leads to a better game feeling in all areas, it plays the same way from start to finish. No longer are there enemies that drain stats which require special medicine to reverse, nor the annoyingly charming Cliff Racers of *Morrowind* that would swoop down on the player. Outside of vampires that can turn invisible, *Oblivion*'s combat is all about smacking enemies and seeing their life bars go down.

Admittedly, the trap design of dungeons does try to shore up fights by adding environmental factors, and turning them against enemies is rewarding, but it is not enough to redeem the rest of the experience.

Every issue mentioned here gets amplified by the invasive level-scaling system, which not only spawns creatures appropriate to your current progress – e.g. replacing a pack of wolves with a group of minotaurs – but also levels up them up to match you, making every encounter, again, fall into a rigid sameness quickly.

The game also sold itself on its Radiant AI, which supposedly gave dynamic schedules to NPCs. However, given the small population and the obvious moments when they stop to execute their scripts, this mostly just generates the uncanny-valley effect, yet again.

Oblivion is and shall remain a controversial title. The wonderment of console players first exposed to a massive living world proves the game worthy of praise, as it successfully adapted CRPGs to a new audience. But just as genuine was the bitterness of CRPG fans that hold *Oblivion* (along with *Fallout 3*) as the seminal example of streamlining classic CRPGs for the mass market. **LL**

Mods:

Unofficial Oblivion Patch: fixes thousands of bugs.

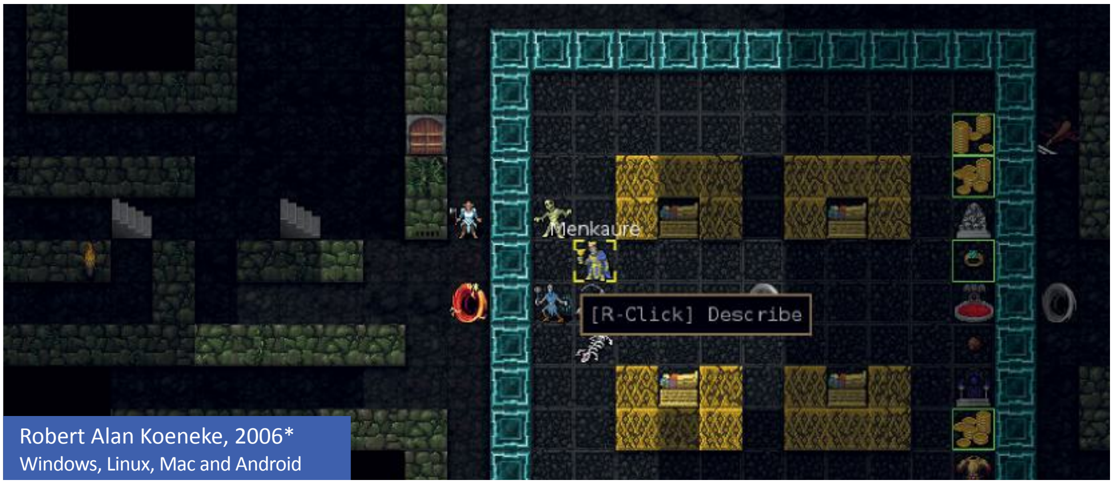
DarNified UI: Offers an interface more suited for PCs.

Oscuro's Oblivion Overhaul: A big mod adding monsters, items and quests, and removing level-scaling.

Nehrim: At Fate's Edge: A brilliant total-overhaul mod that often surpasses the original game.

***Oblivion* received two expansions: *Knights of the Nine* asks you to collect a set of relics to fight the Sorcerer-King, while the critically acclaimed *Shivering Isles* sends players to the plane of madness.**

Dungeon Crawl: Stone Soup



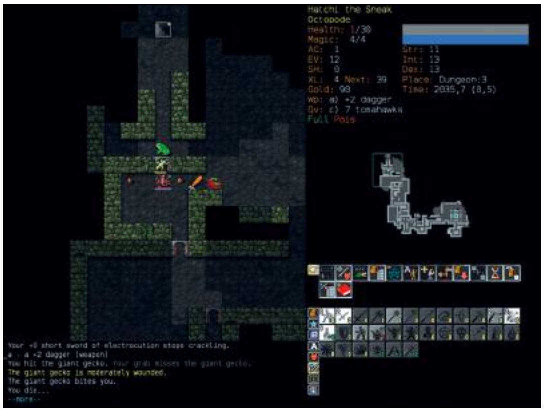
Robert Alan Koeneke, 2006*
Windows, Linux, Mac and Android

***The original *Crawl* was released in 1995, but the *Stone Soup* development branch began only in 2006.**

A huge part of the Roguelike's appeal is its mystery: random generation means that no two games will be the same, making memorisation unfeasible, while the permanent death of player characters discourages careless trial and error.

As a result, the player is expected to learn the game's rules and adapt to different situations using both in-game preparation (levelling up, collecting items) and the knowledge of different strategies for dealing with the inevitable appearance of something they can't face head-on. Failure to do so means their character is lost forever, with no option but to start again.

The trade-off here is that the larger games in this genre take an unimaginably large number of failed attempts to figure out. In fact, this can be such a big time investment that learning games like *NetHack* or *ADOM* by yourself is simply not expected and the number of people who are able to finish them without reading spoilers, watching other people play or just asking more experienced players for advice is very, very low.



```
Hatchi the Sneak
Octopode
Health: 1/30
Magic:  4/4
AC:  1                Str: 11
EV: 12                Int: 13
SH:  0                Dex: 13
XL:  4 Next: 39       Place: Dungeon:3
Gold: 98              Time: 2035,7 (8,5)
Wp: a) +2 dagger
Qv: c) 7 tomahawks
Full Pois
```

```
Your +0 short sword of electrocution stops crackling.
a - a +2 dagger (weapon)
You hit the giant gecko. Your grab misses the giant gecko.
The giant gecko is moderately wounded.
The giant gecko bites you.
You die...
--more--
```

How many games allow you to play as a stealthy octopus assassin? Far from a mere gimmick, each of the many exotic races offers a unique playstyle.

One of the main design principles of *Dungeon Crawl: Stone Soup* is to avoid this while still keeping the game random, complex and difficult. To achieve this, the developers made *Crawl* almost completely free of instant deaths or difficult puzzles.

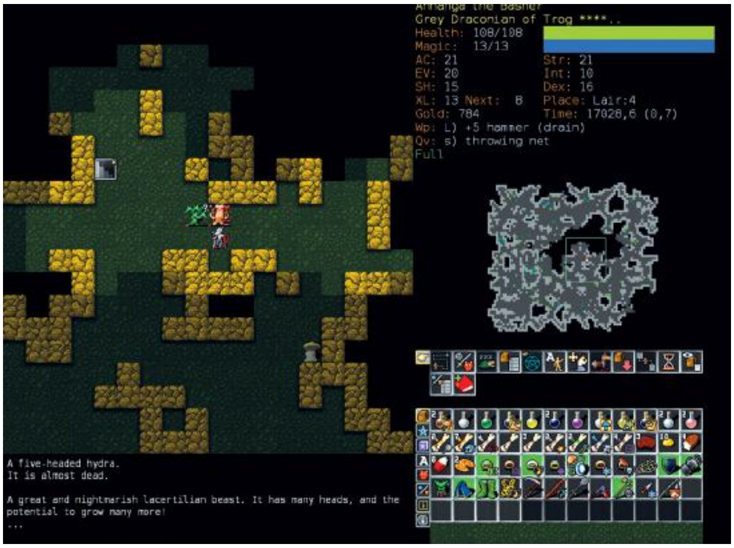
On the other hand, they actively fought against any sort of grinding and disproportionately powerful tactics – even going so far as to remove the ability to sell items in shops. In addition to trying to make the game fall into the "hard but fair" category, *Crawl*'s developers also made their game as user-friendly as possible by including graphical tiles and full mouse support. (Old-fashioned fans can still opt to play the game in ASCII mode.) There's even an automatic exploration mode supposed to reduce the tedium of uncovering everything on the map.

Crawl is generally considered to fall into the "*Hack*-like" tradition of Roguelike games: it's inspired by *NetHack*'s persistent levels with special rooms, multiple dungeon branches, focus on preparation rather than levelling up, etc. However, it also features large, scrolling levels reminiscent of *Moria* or *Angband* and its complexity is not in the interactions between items but in the countless possible character builds.

There's a large variety of races to choose from – 26 to be precise – and, while the standard ones differ mostly in stats, the more outlandish ones play completely differently, such as Ghouls, who must devour corpses to avoid rotting or Formicids, humanoid ants that can dig through walls. There's even a race of sentient housecats that can't use weapons and armour but get additional lives after levelling up.

There's also a choice of class, although that affects only starting skills and equipment – different skills can be learned by using them and someone who started out as a warrior might end up being a mage.

> "My favourite gameplay mechanic is Roguelike permadeath: a character who took hours to build up can be destroyed forever by a few poor decisions and a single turn of bad luck. When you can't just reload a save from two minutes ago again and again until you get past any obstacle, decisions become meaningful and the game stops being a quasi-interactive movie and becomes a game again."
>
> *– Linley Henzell,*
> Crawl*'s original developer*



```
Grey Draconian of Trog ****..
Health: 108/108
Magic:  13/13
AC: 21              Str: 21
EV: 20              Int: 10
SH: 15              Dex: 16
XL: 13 Next:  8     Place: Lair:4
Gold: 784           Time: 17028,6 (0,7)
Wp: L) +5 hammer (drain)
Qv: s) throwing net
Full
```

```
A five-headed hydra.
It is almost dead.

A great and nightmarish lacertilian beast. It has many heads, and the
potential to grow many more!
...
```

Crawl shines in its attention to details, such as the way using cutting weapons on a Hydra will spawn more heads, giving it more attacks per turn

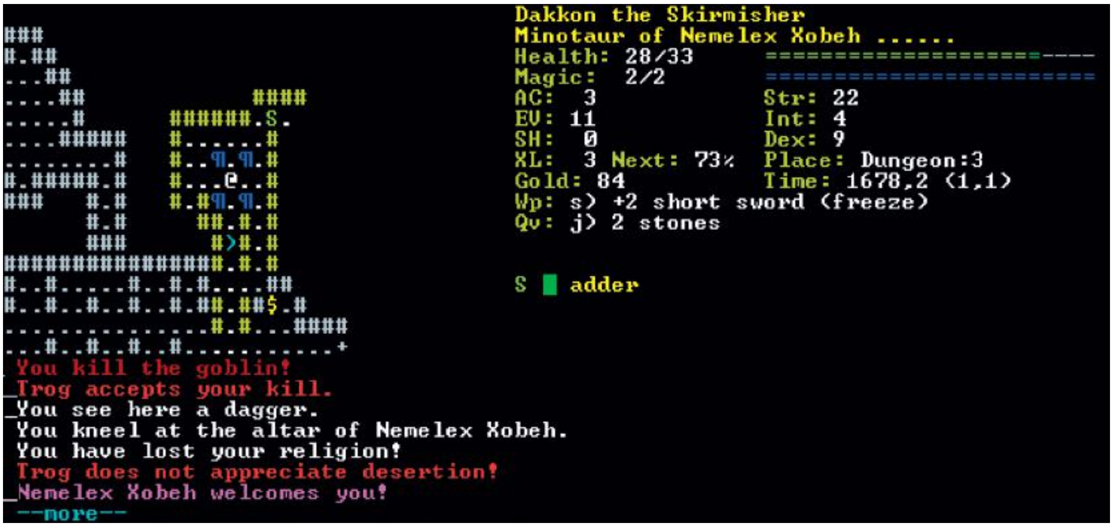
Religion plays a very important role in *Crawl*, as your character can worship many different gods, each providing different benefits while at the same time requiring a specific code of conduct – those range from simple, like Elyvilon wanting you to destroy weapons and avoid evil magic, to strange, like Ashenzari wanting you to wear cursed equipment. Some of the gifts given by those gods can be interesting too: followers of Dithmenos are surrounded by darkness, high-level Jiyva worshippers receive random mutations and those crazy enough to become Xom's playthings will turn *Crawl* into an unpredictable, unfair and extremely difficult game.

The game began its life back in 1995 as *Linley's Dungeon Crawl,* when it was still being developed by a single programmer, Linley Henzell. It was first released in 1997, then constantly updated until 2003.

The "stone soup" version was supposed to be a temporary fork while the development team went on a hiatus, but after some time it was clear that the project was abandoned and *DCSS* became the official version.

Like many Roguelikes, *Crawl* is light on plot – you search for Runes, which will allow you to enter the realm of Zot to retrieve a mysterious Orb. It's not the most fascinating premise, although religion-related flavour text and some of the dungeon branches help to flesh out the world a little bit. Still, it's just a minor complaint about an otherwise excellent and well-designed game.

While *Dungeon Crawl: Stone Soup* might not be my favourite Roguelike, it's a great introduction to the genre before trying to get into titles like *NetHack,* and probably the best choice for those who find typical Roguelikes antiquated or too cryptic. **MM**



```
                                     Dakkon the Skirmisher
###                                  Minotaur of Nemelex Xobeh ......
#.##                                 Health: 28/33    ==================----
...##                                Magic:  2/2      ======================
....##            ####               AC:  3           Str: 22
.....#      ######.S.                EV: 11           Int: 4
....#####   #......#                 SH:  0           Dex: 9
........#   #..¶.¶.#                 XL:  3 Next: 73% Place: Dungeon:3
#.#####.#   #...@..#                 Gold: 84         Time: 1678,2 (1,1)
###   #.#   #.#¶.¶.#                 Wp: s) +2 short sword (freeze)
      #.#     ##.#.#                 Qv: j) 2 stones
      ###      #>#.#
################.#.#
#..#.....#..#.#....##                S █ adder
#..#..#..#..#.##.##$.#
...............#.#...#####
...#..#..#..#...........+
 You kill the goblin!
_Trog accepts your kill.
_You see here a dagger.
 You kneel at the altar of Nemelex Xobeh.
 You have lost your religion!
_Trog does not appreciate desertion!
_Nemelex Xobeh welcomes you!
 --more--
```

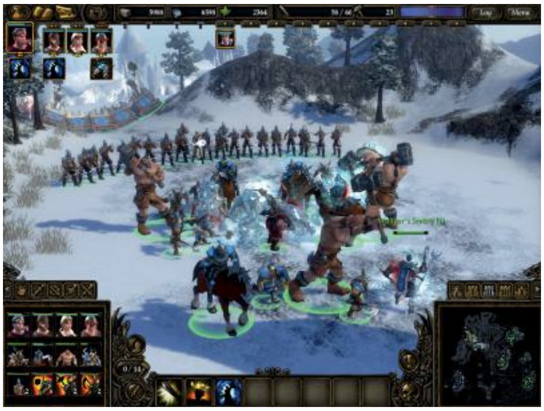
Playing in ASCII mode is also possible; here we abandon Trog, the God of Violence, in favour of Nemelex Xobeh, the Trickster God – a terrible punishment for this betrayal awaits us

SpellForce 2:
Shadow Wars

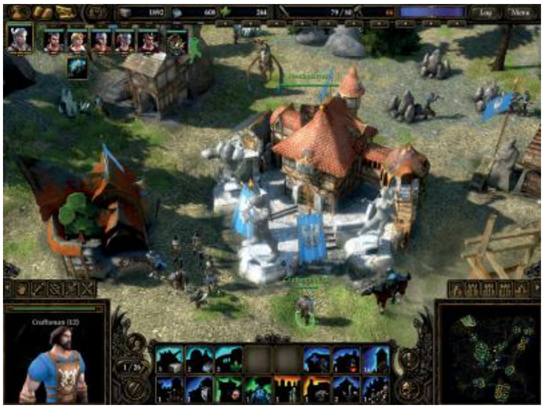
Phenomic, 2006
Windows*

***SpellForce 2 Anniversary Edition* is a 2017 re-release featuring the base game and *Dragon Storm*, also adding updates like bug fixes and widescreen support.**

SpellForce 2 continues the series' attempts to mix an RPG with an RTS, this time with a different approach. It's technically a sequel to the previous entry, but the setting is so far in the future it doesn't fit the established lore. You play as an immortal dragon-blooded human fighting against a rogue Dark Elf faction while your siblings (permanent companions) and assorted vagabonds come along for the ride in the same style of persistent world the first game offered.



This game offers more unique units than the first one, but companions are now fixed, and there are few build choices for each character



The RTS gameplay was streamlined, with fewer resources and buildings, but better pacing; these changes also helped improve the multiplayer mode

SpellForce 2's RPG side has been almost completely neutered: there are martial and magical skill trees that can be mixed, but you are forced to pick almost every skill if you want to go deeper in a tree. Characters receive spells and abilities automatically when you spend a point in a skill, which makes every character essentially indistinguishable, the only variety coming from which spells and abilities are active. Stats have been removed and items only come with +health/mana and a percent increase to damage or resistances. This lack of interesting items hurts the exploration and side-quests, which felt highly rewarding in the first game.

Perhaps due to the mangled character system, the RTS part is better than in *SpellForce 1*, but still somewhat tedious. The endless spawn points of the first game are gone, but now the RTS part is unavoidable. The playable races work a little bit differently, being three factions with two sub-factions each. For example, humans can recruit dwarven and elven units via an upgrade as the story progresses. Even though your armies control better and are produced faster, there is still little to no strategy or tactics involved.

The game received three expansions: *Dragon Storm* requires the base game, while *Faith in Destiny* and *Demons of the Past* are standalone releases. These last two are considered very weak and almost a blemish on the series, especially *FiD*. *DotP*'s most notable quality is being released eight years after the base game.

In spite of *SpellForce 2* being noticeably worse than the original, there is still some enjoyment that can be squeezed out, and the novelty can hold your attention for a while if you let it, but don't expect miracles. Whether you find it playable or not depends on how much you like the improved RTS mechanics and how much that can distract you from the poorer RPG ones. **LAC**

Sengoku Rance

AliceSoft, 2006
Windows*

The *Rance* series of erotic RPGs began back in 1989, following the adventures of a man named Rance in search of money and sex. The series is over a dozen titles long, each different from the previous one, but *Sengoku Rance* is the best of the bunch.

It's a tricky game. The plot starts off simply enough: Rance is given control of the Oda clan during Japan's Warring States era and must unite the land into one nation. The goofy opening hints at a casual Eroge RPG and the first battles are simplistic.

However, a few turns in and the others begin to see your rising power as a threat. Inevitably, you'll find yourself fighting on several fronts, having to make hard decisions on where to send your few officers. Defeat becomes inevitable and you restart the game, wondering how such a game became so complicated.

That's because *Sengoku Rance* is actually a very complex turn-based strategy RPG, centred around a massive cast of officers. Each of them has a skill set that fits them into a role, such as being a tough melee attacker with decent defence or an archer who targets from a back row. The more troops the officers have, the more damage they inflict. If they lose their troops, they are either killed off, captured or flee. Rance can try to hire, release or execute officers he captures, adding a great diversity to your potential roster.

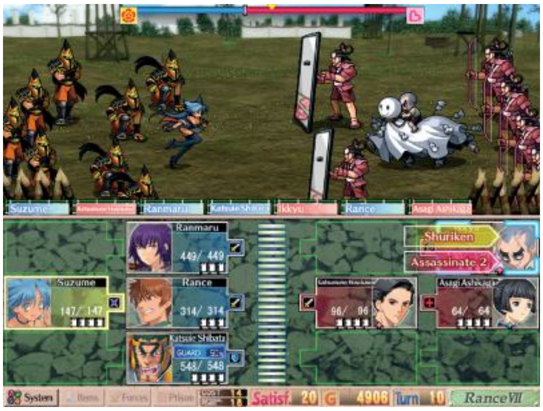
Besides attacking and defending territories, you can also purchase troops and materials, interact with officers, engage in events and explore the provinces or dungeons for treasures. There's a lot to do, and you'll have to consider each officer's stats to succeed.

The storyline also tricks you. Rance is meant as a parody of the RPG hero, who travels with scantily clad females, uses violence as a solution to everything and always sees himself as a hero – even as he rapes women or slays monsters while they beg for mercy.

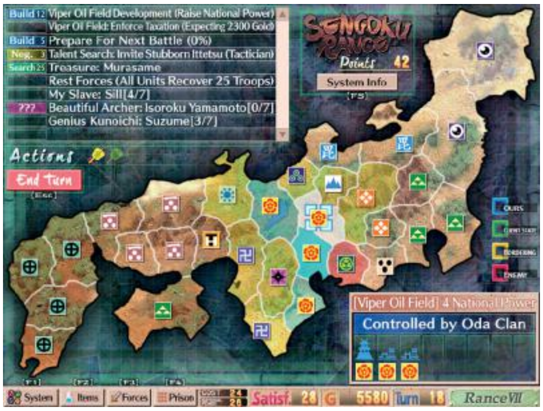
But what starts as a comedic parody seamlessly transitions into a game about responsibility to friends and allies as Rance slowly learns compassion, then closes out in grim horror, with the tolls of war taking him into a cycle of depression that affects gameplay.

Packing a surprising story, challenging battles, great artwork and multiple endings, *Sengoku Rance* is quite the work. I highly recommend everyone giving it a try, even if Eroge is not your thing. **DT**

***Sengoku Rance* has had a fan translation since 2009, but was officially translated by MangaGamer only in 2019, alongside other *Rance* titles.**

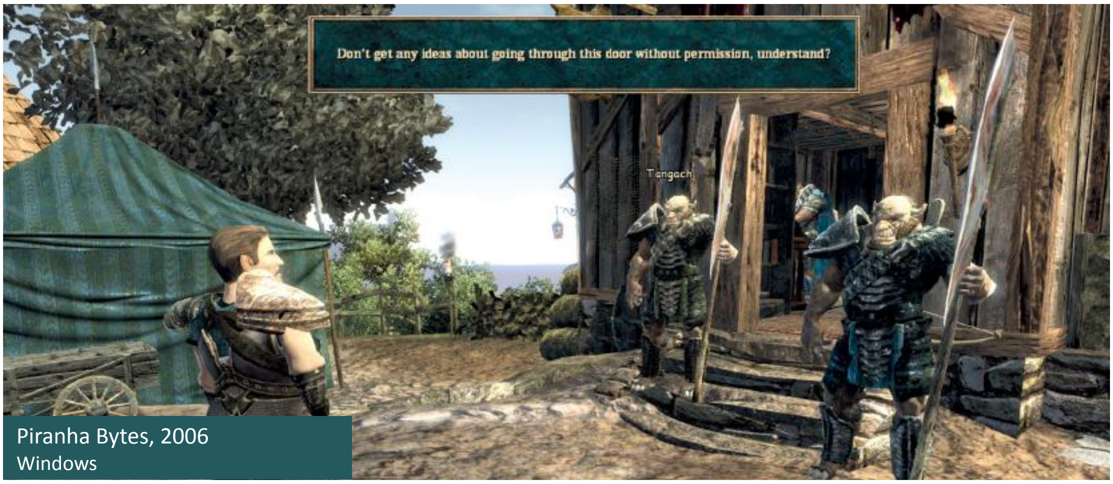

Suzume
Ranmaru
Ikkyu
Rance
Asagi Ashikaga
Ranmaru
449/ 449
Shuriken
Assassinate 2
Suzume
147/ 147
Rance
314/ 314
96/ 96
Asagi Ashikaga
64/ 64
Katsuie Shibata
GUARD
548/ 548
System
Items
Forces
Prison
Satisf. 20
G 4906
Turn 10
Rance VII

There are several types of trooper, each with their own strengths; troops with special commanders can also have unique attacks or skills


Build 12 Viper Oil Field Development (Raise National Power)
Viper Oil Field: Enforce Taxation (Expecting 2300 Gold)
Build 5 Prepare For Next Battle (0%)
Neg. 3 Talent Search: Invite Stubborn Ittetsu (Tactician)
Search 25 Treasure: Murasame
Rest Forces (All Units Recover 25 Troops)
My Slave: Sill[4/7]
??? Beautiful Archer: Isoroku Yamamoto[0/7]
Genius Kunoichi: Suzume[3/7]
Sengoku Rance
Points 42
System Info
Actions
End Turn
[Viper Oil Field] 4 National Power
Controlled by Oda Clan
System
Items
Forces
Prison
Satisf. 28
G 5580
Turn 18
Rance VII

The huge number of provinces, officers, treasures, dungeons, items and events makes every playthrough different

Gothic 3


Don't get any ideas about going through this door without permission, understand?
Tangach

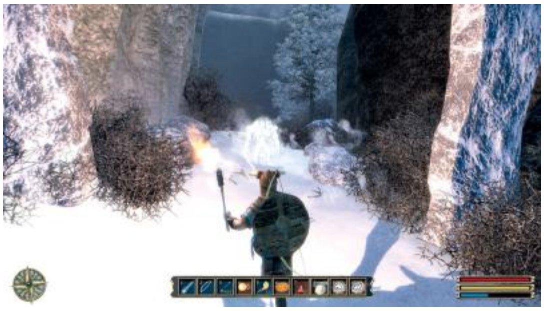
Piranha Bytes, 2006
Windows

Gothic 3's release was plagued by game-breaking bugs, which led to bad reviews and a "Disappointment of the Year" award. The Community Patch fixed most issues and is now officially endorsed by the game's publisher.

Gothic 3 might be one of the most ambitious games ever attempted, trying to rival *The Elder Scrolls* for size but with the specific depth that Piranha Bytes showcased in their much-lauded *Gothic* series. But greatness is not made by ambition alone, sadly, and saying this game is a gem in the rough would be an understatement.

Following on from *Gothic 2*'s ending, the nameless protagonist now reaches the mainland, where the Kingdom of Myrtana is under Orc subjugation. While Orcs in the previous games were just savages, the mainland conquerors are less Tolkien and more Klingon. They have an orderly warrior culture based on strength, but also a meritocracy with a strong sense of justice. This change was necessary to push the player towards possibly thinking of the Orcs in a positive light, maybe even allying with them, as *Gothic 3* features one of the most interesting reputation systems ever attempted.

The Orcs and the human rebels (as well as other factions) have their own rating for the hero and raising it will grant access to new quests, gear and areas. Moreover, each town has its own individual rating, and when it is high enough the hero is allowed to see the town's leader. From there he can decide to overthrow the current establishment or crush the dissidents.



Gothic 3's combat is fundamentally flawed, as you can stun-lock almost any enemy simply by attacking first

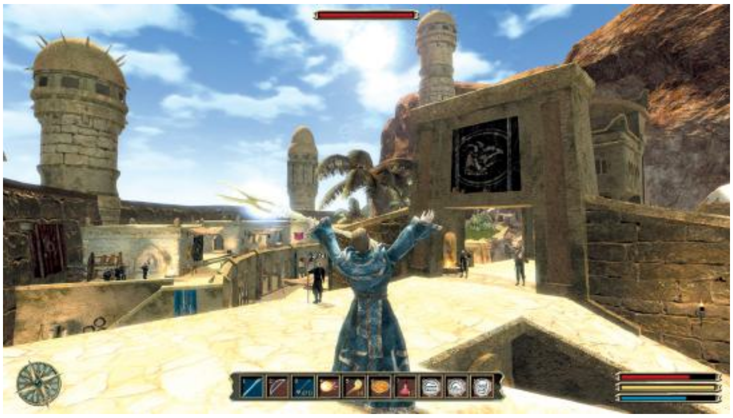
This system isn't limited just to the Orcs and human rebels in the temperate kingdom of Myrtana. *Gothic 3*'s world is huge, spanning three regions and over a dozen towns, with a similar faction choice to be made regarding the Hashishin and Nomads who live in the southern desert land of Varant. Unfortunately, the northern arctic region of Nordmar only has quests that allow siding with the local Barbarians against the Orcs; as such, the whole area just feels unfinished.

Sadly, that feeling pervades the entire game. While the idea of growing your reputation in each given city is amazing, in practice it's less so, since it mostly boils down to performing fetch quests. Some of these are well-contextualised, like playing spy for the Orcish mercenaries, but for the most part they are menial jobs like getting meat or killing wolves for each town and village – an exercise in pure tedium.

To top this off is the fact that there isn't much interconnectivity between factions. You can complete quests in all towns and need only decide which side to take during the endgame, which makes it shallow and much less replayable than previous *Gothic*s, in which they forced you into a faction from the start. This is further reinforced by the fact that if more than a few towns are freed or rebellions crushed then the defeated factions will attack you on sight, something which isn't explained to the player in any way.

But even with all that, there's a sense of wonder to be derived from actually impacting the world by deciding who will rule each town. The game doesn't hold your hand and allows you to go anywhere, do anything and kill anyone from the start. And while the story is almost non-existent for most of the game, there are three possible endings based on the faction you end up supporting, plus slides showing the fate of key characters. Yet, *Gothic 3* could have been so much more.

> "What happens with the narrative when a major character dies? How can we tell a story without a reliable narrator? In this point we didn't meet our own expectations. The story is great but it slumbers beneath the surface and cannot really take off, because there is no mouthpiece to tell it."
>
> *– Kai Rosenkranz,*
> Gothic 3*'s developer and composer*



Some areas, like this desert stronghold, can only be entered after you gain enough reputation with their faction – or kill the guards

The other aspects of this game don't have such extenuating circumstances. Gone is the rewarding exploration with hand-placed items, replaced by progressive randomised loot where the contents of chests you find are decided by the number of chests previously opened. This results in situations in which the player manages to brave caves filled with monsters only to be rewarded with junk, while finding the better items in chests on the side of the road.

Combat is a shadow of its former self: melee is decided by who manages to strike first, due to stun-locking – a far cry from the previous *Gothic*s, in which timing was essential. There's also a new, completely unnecessary endurance bar that quickly drains as soon as combat starts and makes no sense in a game with lengthy town battles. Archery, on the other hand, is improved due to adding manual aiming and physics, which make it feel much more satisfying.

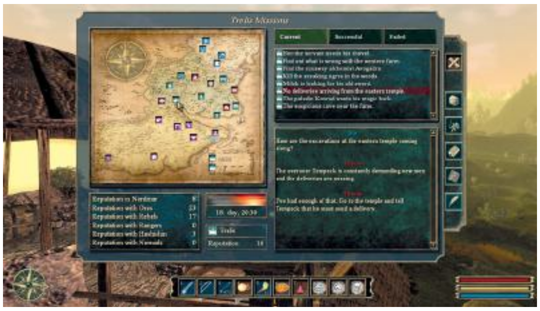
Magic is roughly the same, but the progression structure has been changed for the worse. You don't start as a mundane character who has to prove themselves in order to become a mage – now you can focus on magic from the beginning. Some of the higher-level spells are quite spectacular, like changing night into day, but only the player has access to them, since all other mages are limited to basic offensive spells.

Engine-wise, *Gothic 3* looks quite good for its time, and the lack of any loading screen in such a huge open world is an impressive feat. That said, there are plenty of visual quirks that require some tweaking – the draw distance especially, since it's pitifully small. The game is also too colourful and bright for the grim atmosphere it wants to portray, something that its predecessors did quite well.

It should be noted that *Gothic 3* was bug-ridden on launch and only after extensive patching by the community was it truly finished. More than that, the fans added an optional alternative AI and system balancing to the game, but all it does, ultimately, is smooth a broken experience. While the community's bug fixes are absolutely essential, breezing through the game on Easy as a mage with the alternative changes disabled is probably the most enjoyable way to see what this game does well.

In its own twisted way, *Gothic 3* is an endearing game, thanks to its scope and ambition in creating a living, breathing world – which was beyond the time and budget Piranha Bytes had available. Even so, there are a couple of unique elements here, and with the proper patches it is a worthwhile experience. Not necessarily one that needs to be finished, but one that can offer some worthwhile moments. **LL**

In 2008 JoWooD Entertainment published *Gothic 3: Forsaken Gods*, a stand-alone expansion developed by Trine Games. Sadly, it's little more than a quick cash-in, replicating *Gothic 3*'s faults without any of its redeeming qualities.



Gothic 3 offers an excellent map that tracks the locations you've discovered, their quests and your reputation

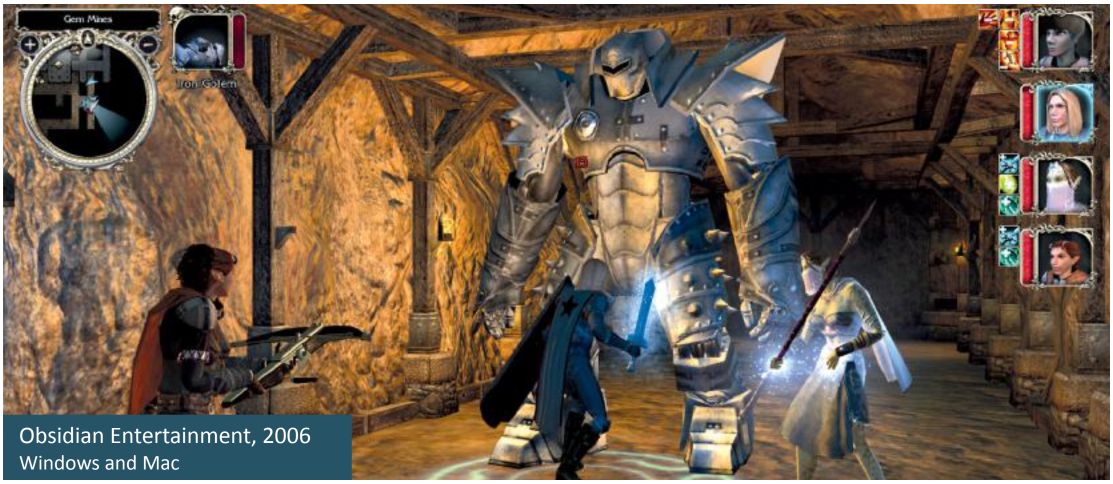
Mods:

Community Patch: Absolutely essential, it eliminates hundreds of game-breaking bugs. It also offers optional alternative balancing/AI, which makes the game harder and more complex – though arguably not better.

Questpaket: Adds a lot of new content to the game, especially new quests. Has fan-made German voice acting but a rather poor English translation.

Content Mod: Expands upon the Questpaket, adding even more quests, items, equipment and new textures.

Neverwinter Nights 2



Obsidian Entertainment, 2006
Windows and Mac

NWN2 **uses an updated version of** ***NWN*****'s Aurora engine, called Electron. Obsidian moved it from OpenGL to DirectX, planning for an Xbox 360 release. However, due to lack of funds the port was never made.**

Obsidian's second game, once again a sequel to a BioWare title, *Neverwinter Nights 2* is set in the *Forgotten Realms*, based on a modified *Dungeons & Dragons* 3.5 ruleset. The game features a long single-player campaign, an elaborate toolset for making custom content, and a multiplayer mode that allows players to create persistent role-playing servers, or just play through the game with a friend or two.

The most impressive feature of *NWN2* is the character system, sporting a very generous number of classes, races and build options, including the option to pick multiple classes as your character improves. Few games can compare when it comes to the sheer variety of options for creating and developing your character. You could be a gnomish cleric/rogue who specialises in assassination, or perhaps a half-angel warlock mowing down enemies with dark magic and a fire-enchanted scythe.

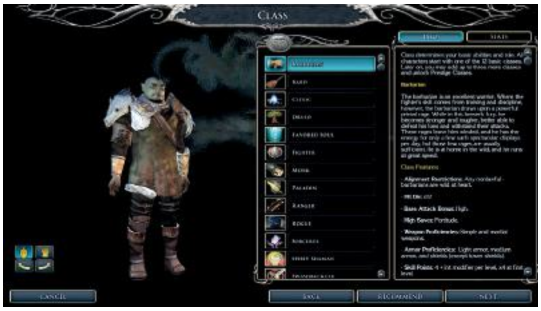
Equally impressive is that the game features several template builds for each class, providing ample guidance on what to pick for players who, like myself, have little prior familiarity with the *D&D* ruleset. It is everything a power gamer could hope for, while still being entirely accessible for the newcomer.

The only real flaw of the character system is a slight lack of documentation, making external aids like wikis a requirement for in-depth planning and fully understanding your options, although this will only bother those who really like the gritty details.

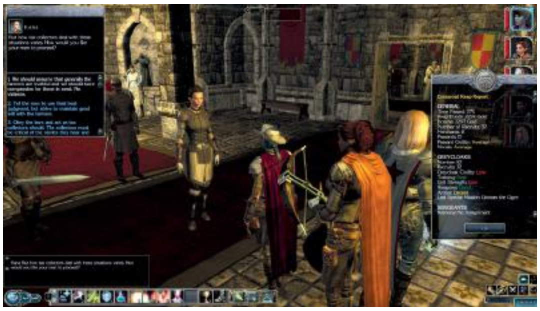
Sadly, combat does not live up to the promise of the character system, featuring a messy real-time-with-pause system and a clunky camera that makes it hard to tell what is going on, further obscured by fancy spell effects that block your view.

And cast spells you will, because there's no limit to resting, and therefore no limit to spell-casting and health restoration. Combat is further hampered by generally poor AI and, in the campaign, a lack of good encounter design, making tactics mostly unnecessary. Overall, most battles will amount to little more than watching combat rounds roll on while you wait for the enemy health bars to deplete.

Outside of combat, *NWN2* also features various skill checks, both in-dialogue and while exploring, and a crafting system, which works but isn't exciting. Getting enjoyment from these activities depends a lot on the writing and dungeon design, which most of the time works well enough, a few boring areas excepted.



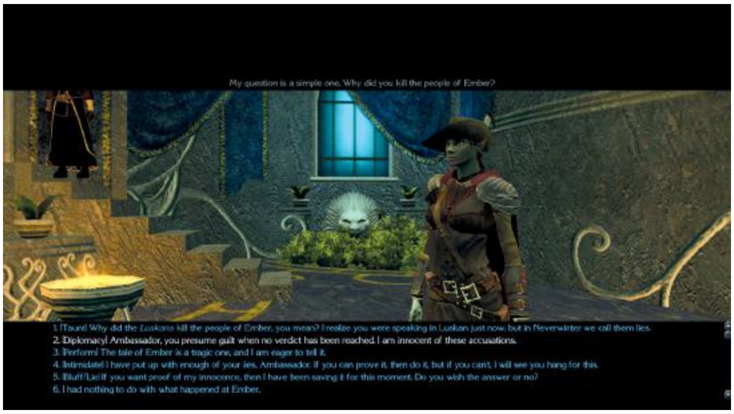
Character creation fully employs *D&D* 3.5, with dozens of races, sub-races, classes and prestige classes to choose from



Eventually, you'll get to manage a stronghold, rebuilding its walls, training guards and making various decisions

"The biggest problems during development were an unrealistic scope and a lack of focus on quality/fun from the beginning. It's arguable that the former resulted in the latter. With *D&D* games, it's easy to become consumed by the idea of adding every feat, class, and race you can find in various books."

– Josh Sawyer,
NWN2*'s lead designer*



My question is a simple one. Why did you kill the people of Ember?

1. [Taunt] Why did the *Luskans* kill the people of Ember, you mean? I realize you were speaking in Luskan just now, but in Neverwinter we call them lies.
2. Diplomacy] Ambassador, you presume guilt when no verdict has been reached. I am innocent of these accusations.
3. [Perform] The tale of Ember is a tragic one, and I am eager to tell it.
4. [Intimidate] I have put up with enough of your lies, Ambassador. If you can prove it, then do it, but if you can't, I will see you hang for this.
5. [Bluff/Lie] If you want proof of my innocence, then I have been saving it for this moment. Do you wish the answer or no?
6. I had nothing to do with what happened at Ember.

NWN2 makes great use of skill checks, especially during some of its dialogues, where it presents multiple approaches with varying results

NWN2's campaign is split into three acts: the first features low-level adventuring on the road to and inside the city of Neverwinter; the second revolves around an excellent trial; and the third around gathering allies to stop the big bad.

The campaign as a whole is not bad or particularly good, but the pacing of the first act is horrendous, involving seemingly endless traipses to dungeons to unlock plot gates. The trial in the second act is a great example of how to do dialogue as a boss battle, only slightly undercut by the fact that your failure means nothing. The third act gives the player a stronghold to manage, providing a much-needed breath of fresh air, even if the decisions are mostly without consequence.

During the campaign, you are joined by four-at-a-time of 12 total companions (mostly of your choice, sometimes imposed): one of every base class except the Barbarian. This makes all PC classes relevant, but the writing is spread a bit thin, and most of the characters are stereotypes of their class. They will sometimes interject during quests, allowing you to gain or lose loyalty with them, which has consequences later in the campaign when that loyalty is tested.

Overall, *NWN2* is a very strong foundation for a good CRPG, but the content is lacking, something that was addressed in the expansions.

NWN2 features three different camera and control modes, from third-person to top-down, but they all work poorly

The first one, *Mask of the Betrayer*, featured a new campaign with vastly improved writing, while the second expansion, *Storm of Zehir*, introduced one with much stronger gameplay. *NWN2* also received an official third-party adventure pack made by Ossian Studios called *Mysteries of Westgate*, featuring a small city with less but more significant combat.

With all this considered, *Neverwinter Nights 2* is more successful as a foundation for a great RPG than it is one itself, but it is still worth checking out, if only for mods or as an appetiser for the expansions. **JA**

NWN2 offered persistent multiplayer servers through Gamespy, but the service closed in 2012. You can still play through community-hosted servers, listed at www.nwnlist.com.

Mods:

NWN2's toolset is very powerful, but lost NWN1's accessibility. Still, fans have created some great content:

Tony_K's Companion and Monster AI Mod: Improves the game's AI, making it smarter and adding many quality-of-life features and improvements.

Kaedrin's PrC Pack: Adds many new races, classes and prestige classes, plus new spells and cleric domains.

Baldur's Gate Reloaded: A complete remake of the first *Baldur's Gate,* updated to fit the *D&D* 3.5 ruleset.

Wulverheim: A huge, open-world sandbox campaign, heavily inspired by *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion.*

Pool of Radiance Remastered: An award-winning remake of classic CRPG *Pool of Radiance*.

The Maimed God's Saga: A brilliant module in which you play a cleric of Tyr sent on a quest that will test his faith. Has great writing and a heavy role-playing focus.

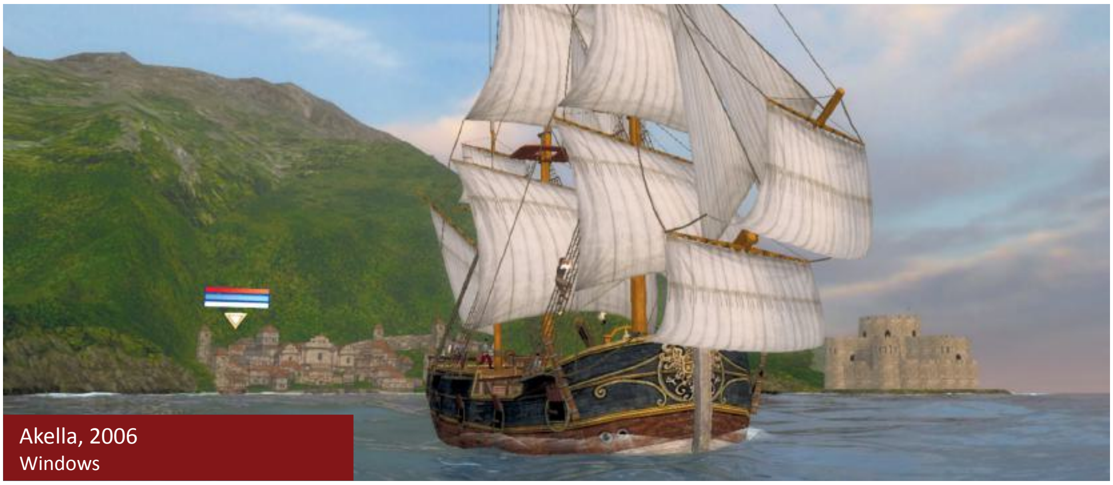
Conan Chronicles: A multi-chapter campaign based on various short stories from *Conan the Barbarian*.

Planescape - The Shaper of Dreams: An epic saga of a woman trying save her husband from the Abyss.

Dark Waters: A three-part pirate campaign that pushes the limits of the engine, adding new gameplay modes such as naval battles and card collecting.

There are some valuable resources for *NWN2* players, such as the *NWN2* wiki, which offers extensive documentation of the game's mechanics, and an online Character Builder, available at www.nwn2db.com.

Age of Pirates: Caribbean Tales



Akella, 2006
Windows

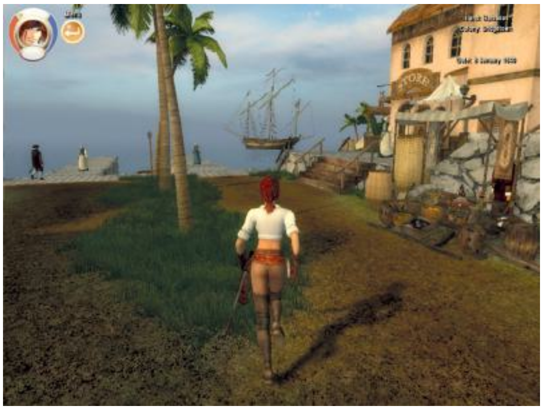
The *Age of Pirates/Sea Dogs* series is what happens when Russians play a lot of *Sid Meier's Pirates* and decide that they can do it better. By Crom, they almost did.

The current best way to play the *Age of Pirates/ Sea Dogs* games is using *Maelstrom*, a fan-made update of the series' engine.

The series began with *Sea Dogs* (a.k.a. *Corsairs*) in 2000. Bethesda then signed to publish a sequel, but renamed it to *Pirates of the Caribbean* (2003) to take advantage of Disney's popular movie series. In 2006, Akella released *Age of Pirates: Caribbean Tales*, changing the series' name due to copyright issues.

Afterwards, other developers began to make sequels. *Age of Pirates 2: City of Abandoned Ships* (2007) was a huge leap forward, adding three playable characters, better combat and a deeper stats system so you could further customise your characters. Years later came *Sea Dogs: To Each His Own* (2012), a professionally made mod released as a stand-alone game, improving the graphics and adding a more involved story.

Each new game improved the engine and some of the systems, building upon the assets of the previous one, so the series' core gameplay remained constant: open-world sailing, fencing and swashbuckling.



Towns offer taverns to hire crew and hear rumours, multiple shops, and NPCs who can provide you with quests – or they can be captured and pillaged

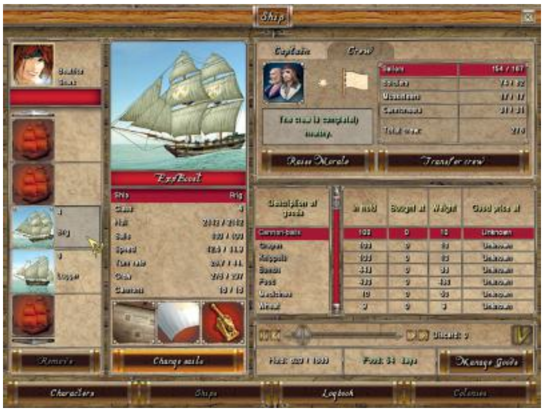
You usually start the game by choosing a character (some games only have one, others have multiple), a starting class (which defines your stats and initial gear) and a nation (England, France, Spain or Holland). You'll then have to complete a starting tutorial, which ranges from short and skippable in some games to somewhat longer, and story-based, in others. After that, you set sail – the entire Caribbean is now open to you.

You can sail in third- or first-person view, travel the world-map in an overhead travel mode and explore towns, forts and jungles on foot, talking to NPCs for quests and rumours. You'll trade, fight and generally blunder your way across the Caribbean and, if you wander enough, run into special quests that can reward you with considerable wealth and rare ships.

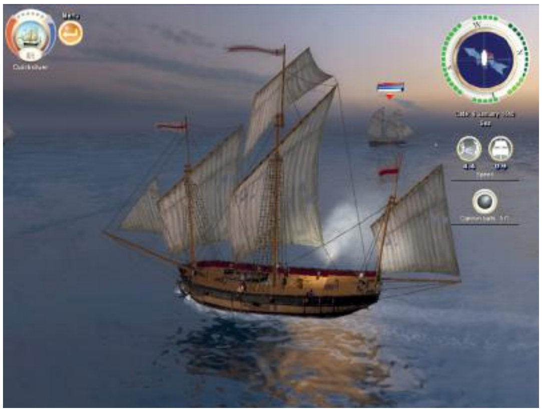
Your character's skills improve the more you use them, and you can buy perks that add key benefits to your playstyle. You can also hire ship officers and fighters to cover whatever skill deficiencies you have.

Fighting on land or while boarding involves two key parameters: health and stamina. You die when you run out of health, and you can't swat even a fly without stamina. You and your opponents play by the same rules, and while one-on-one combat is easy, getting swarmed by a group can be anything from challenging to tedious, depending on how well-stocked you are with potions. You also have the emergency option of firing a pistol, which, while handy in a pinch, takes long enough to reload that swordplay remains the chief means of fighting.

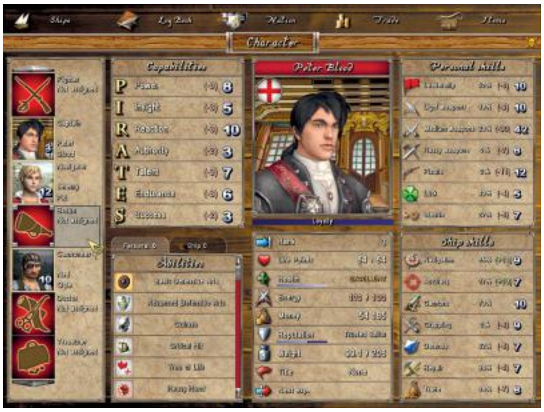
The first games have button-mashing combat, but the swordplay was upgraded after *Caribbean Tales*, offering six moves: a light swing, a lunge, a heavy overhand blow, a counter attack, a parry and a huge swing that cuts at everyone in front of you. You can also block attacks, and sidestep or dodge backwards.



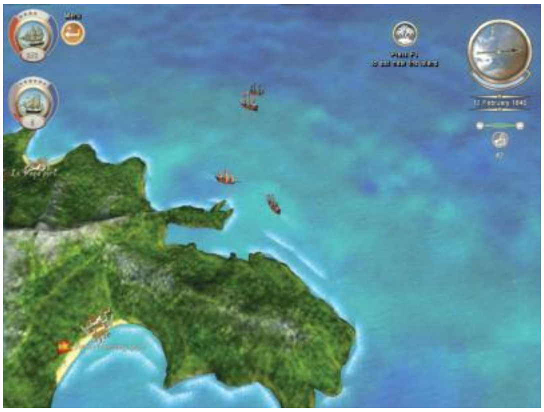
You have to carefully manage your crew, morale and cargo, as they will affect your efficiency while sailing and fighting



Sea battles require you to pay close attention to the wind and your cannon's range, manoeuvering carefully



Age of Pirates 2 added the PIRATES stats system, which was heavily inspired by *Fallout*'s SPECIAL system



Long journeys are done in an overhead world map; you'll have to keep an eye on food, morale and other ships

A nice abstraction when boarding a ship and heavily outnumbered: instead of facing vast numbers, beyond the engine's capacity, you instead face very tough opponents who are several levels ahead of you. A nice touch, if a bit perplexing to new players.

Sea combat is an entirely different beast. It might seem slow and ponderous (hint: the + button speeds up the game) but is far more character-skill dependent than fencing. You get regular cannonballs for all-round damage, grapeshot for greater hull damage, chain-shot for sail damage and explosives for setting ships on fire. All of them have their uses, no matter your style of ship fighting. You can also command a fleet of ships into battle, so you won't always face utterly terrible odds.

Due warning: this series is as Russian as they get. Outdated graphics, indifferent writing, no hand-holding, an emphasis on certain aspects of "realism", extremely obscure mechanics and quests that run the gamut from simple FedEx quests to utterly crazy gigs that are the equivalent of looking for an ink-drop in the entire goddamn Caribbean.

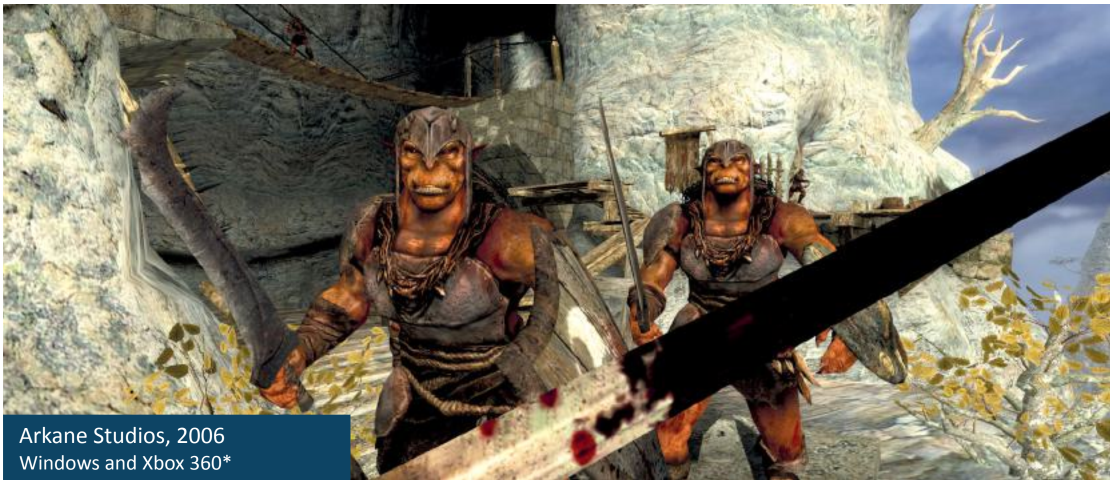
It's all very daunting to newcomers. Even if you spend hundreds of hours playing, you'll probably still need a walkthrough to complete some of the more unique quests, especially the endgame ones.

On the other hand, they offer an amazingly open experience, similar to that of *Mount & Blade* (2008), and you can definitely see your character progress from landlubber to sea dog, master fencer, etc. There's a lot of RPG here, from choosing your character's initial build, to working for different factions, to getting a sustainable economy going. Forget wooing the governor's daughter like in *Sid Meier's Pirates*. Here you can BE the governor. But you gotta take over the colony first. Good luck.

Since the games are all very similar, it's hard to point out one as the best. Furthermore, every entry in the series has one or two big, exclusive mods, so the community is quite fractured. Good starting points are *Sea Dogs: To Each His Own* (the latest entry, has a good story and better graphics) and *Pirates of the Caribbean* with the *New Horizons* mod (huge amount of content and lots of options for free play). Just pick one and set sail into a life of adventures. **ER**

By editing the game's .ini files you can unlock higher resolutions. In *Age of Pirates 2: City of Abandoned Ships* you can also unlock 15 new starting characters.

Dark Messiah:
Might and Magic

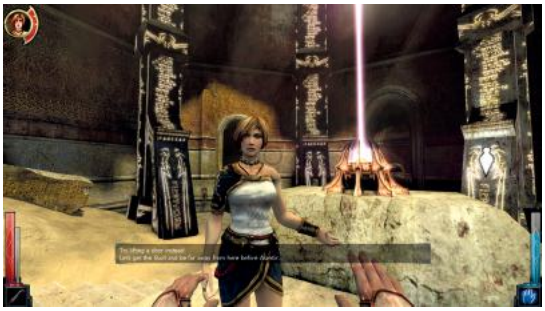

Arkane Studios, 2006
Windows and Xbox 360*

Dark Messiah* **was ported to the Xbox 360 in 2008, under the title ***Dark Messiah: Might and Magic - Elements*****, with extra levels and new multiplayer modes.**

When the 3DO Company went bankrupt in 2003, Ubisoft bought the *Might and Magic* licence and did a complete reboot. Its first new game, *Heroes of Might and Magic V*, presented a new world called Ashan and followed the story of a group of knights fending off a demon invasion and uncovering the Prophecy of the Demon Messiah, who would one day unleash chaos upon the world.

Twenty Ashan and three Earth years later, the "kicking simulator" formally known as *Dark Messiah: Might and Magic* details the adventures of Sareth, a warrior sent to retrieve an artefact known as the Skull of Shadows. He is aided by Xana, a spirit confined inside his soul right in the game's beginning cutscene.

While the story boasts four endings (really the permutations of two major choices), it's fairly simple and linear. You can almost guess the plot points by the first hour of the game, after the introduction of all the roles. It's quite cheesy and probably not intended to be taken seriously, seeing that all characters can be easily read and predicted – especially Xana's voice steering you towards conflict. Regardless, considering the franchise's large storyline background and its context, *Dark Messiah*'s storyline is actually quite important to the new *Might and Magic* universe.


You'll be joined by a young mage, Leanna, and by Xana, a spirit who provides advice and snarky comments

The game blends this convoluted setting with what's possibly the best first-person melee combat in gaming. It starts slowly, with a tutorial level that dissects some of the arguably composite mechanics of the game. But within minutes into the first chapter, you're thrown right into the action, and will learn that combat here is not a matter of mashing buttons.

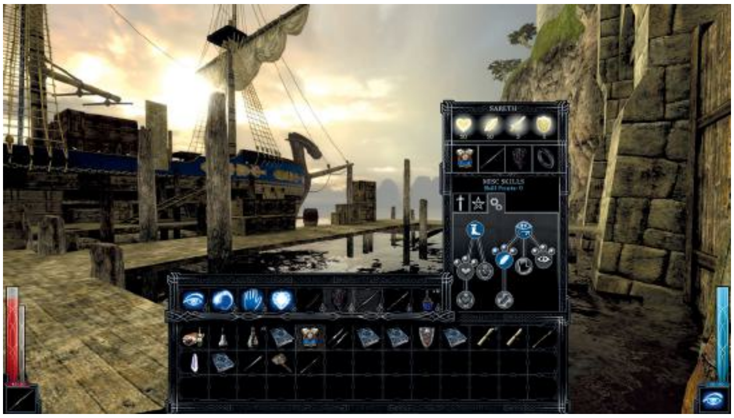
The combat is fast and deadly, and offers a solid array of options for inflicting damage and defending yourself, whilst demanding a careful approach to enemies. You can equip swords, daggers and staffs, attacking with stabs, slashes and lunges, depending on your movement – these can be enhanced by holding down the mouse button, unleashing a power attack. Shields will block attacks easily but can be destroyed, while parrying is risky but allows for counter-strikes.

Thanks to the solid physics engine, you can also employ the environment to your advantage – setting objects on fire, triggering traps and destroying pillars placed next to patrolling guards. Another option is kicking enemies into spikes or over cliffs, a tactic so powerful on release it could be used to "cheese" the entire game and became the source of many jokes.

Being a game focused on action, *Dark Messiah*'s RPG elements are simplified. Instead of gaining XP and levelling up by killing, you're given skill points for each objective met, of which there are plenty per chapter. There are three main skill trees to pursue – Combat, Magic and Miscellaneous. Even though they are small, it's wise not to spread your points too thin.

Combat skills allow you to deal more damage, disarm enemies and aim better with the bow, while Miscellaneous skills include passive bonus and a few Thief skills, such as lock-picking and backstabbing. The stealth system isn't always useful, but it's quite robust, based on light and sound, as in the *Thief* games.

> “I clearly remember when we discovered how creating an icy surface made the orcs slip on it. I think it was when we realised that we were right in trying to create a simulated world where everything was possible. This was really fun.”
>
> *– Raphael Colantonio,* Dark Messiah*’s creative director*



The UI is simple and elegant, with a quick bar, a small slot-based inventory and three talent trees you can spend skill points on

The Magic skill tree features standard fare such as fireballs and healing magic, but also spells to freeze the ground and see in the dark, plus an amusing telekinesis power that works just like *Half-Life 2*’s Gravity Gun.

While you’ll grow quite powerful during your journey, equipment changes will be sparse. Still, with each new sword, dagger, staff, bow or armour you’ll get visibly stronger, and some weapons have special abilities that manage to make them fairly memorable.

Dark Messiah employs a 2006 version of Valve’s Source engine, complemented by Havok’s powerful physics engine. The developers managed to deliver an outstanding presentation of medieval architecture, with massive gates, churches, temples in ruins, Orc constructions, a complete boat and much more. It’s not without its flaws, though: walking and jumping on narrow edges have to be executed with extreme caution, light sources in some places may deter your field of view and the chase in the third chapter can be annoying with its twists and turns and rope climbing. It also tends to crash sometimes, so save often.

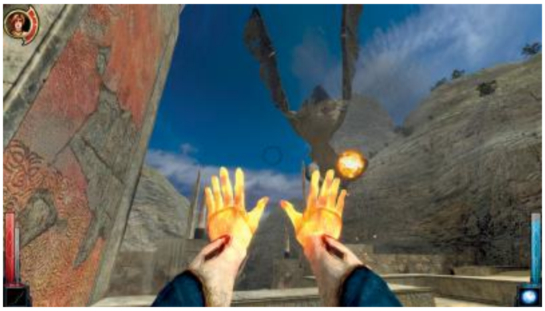
While the levels can be impressive, they are all too linear – so much so, Arkane didn’t even bother to include a map system. But there are plenty of secret item caches to find, which, depending on your familiarity with the game, may decide if you live or die.

Multiplayer, although nearly dead at the time of writing, still can be enjoyed if you can find some friends and an available server. Game modes include the classic “capture the flag” and “crusade”, in which the teams try to take control of the whole map and can level up, as in single-player mode. The maps are visually stunning and well-designed, with open arenas for the inexorable bloodshed, and nooks and crannies for sneaking around and setting up traps and ambushes.

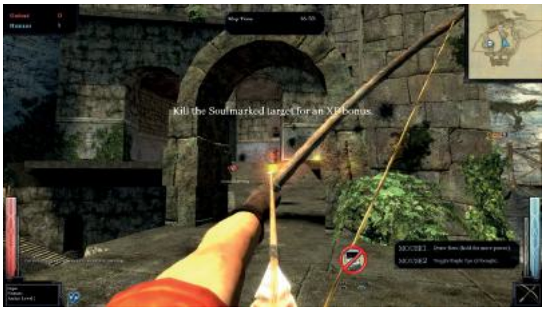
Arkane’s concern for detail is substantial even in their least known game: there’s a forge that you can use to make your own sword; a bow that allows you to shoot ropes and climb them; mage apprentices who tremble in fear once they see you; and a rewarding “adrenaline boost” that activates after a certain number of killings, allowing you to mangle enemies with a single strike or beefed-up spell. A work of passion, these details add a lot to the fun factor, even if they are not very important or innovative.

Unfortunately, none of this was enough to make this underrated game stand out among the other big releases of 2006. Nonetheless, *Dark Messiah* should be tried by anyone with at least a mild interest in first-person RPGs – or who wants to experience the best kicking physics of all time. There has not yet been a foot stronger than Sareth’s. **GZ**

After *Arx Fatalis*, Arkane was approached by Valve, who offered them the Source engine. They used it on two projects: an FPS called *The Crossing*, which was never released, and *Arx Fatalis 2*, which became *Dark Messiah* after they closed a deal with Ubisoft.



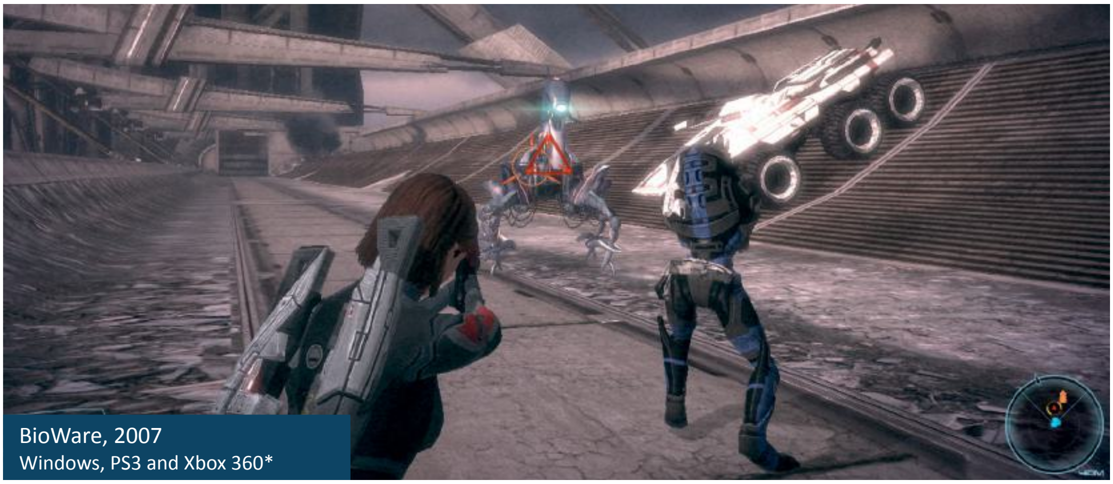
The game is focused on melee combat, but you’ll also have access to 12 spells, from fireballs to telekinesis



Kill the Soulmarked target for an XP bonus.

The multiplayer mode offers five classes with unique skills and huge arenas for battle

Mass Effect



BioWare, 2007
Windows, PS3 and Xbox 360*

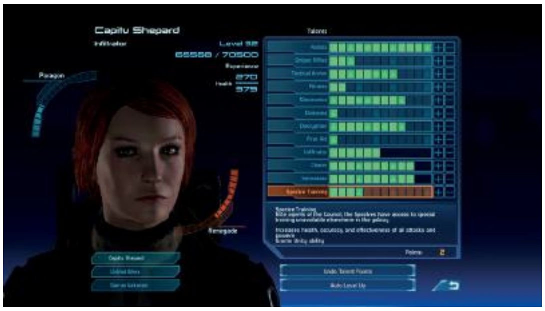
During recent decades, we have had many popular RPGs that conquered millions of fans and left marks on the entire industry. *Mass Effect* is indisputably one of the most influential of all. An epic trilogy that spanned six years – from 2007 to 2012 – yet was still contained in a single console generation, using the same engine. Hard to say if we'll ever see an ambitious project like this succeed again.

***Mass Effect* became a cross-media hit, with seven novels, ten comic series, board games, action figures, a theme park ride and even an animated movie. A live-action movie was announced in 2010, but later cancelled.**

Mass Effect feels like the end goal of what began back with *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* – the scope, narrative and choices of a computer RPG, but in an accessible form, easily playable on controllers. BioWare had tried using real-time martial arts combat in *Jade Empire*, but titles like *Resident Evil 4* (2005) and *Gears of War* (2006) proved that third-person shooters were a perfect match for consoles.

Yet *Mass Effect* is not just "*KotOR* with guns"; it draws heavily from *Star Trek* and *Babylon 5*, as well as classic space RPGs like *StarFlight* and *Star Control*.

You're not a young farmer in search of adventure, nor a lone mercenary who's getting into trouble – you're Commander Shepard, soldier of the Human Alliance. You have missions, commanding officers and a ship, and must answer to the Citadel Council, a committee of advanced alien races who rule the civilised galaxy.



The character system in *ME1* is the most complex of the series, allowing great customisation of playstyle

You start by defining who Commander Shepard is, choosing gender, background and one of six classes. These range from the Soldier, a gun combat specialist, through the Engineer, who focuses on tech (shields, hacking), to the Adept, who uses powerful biotic abilities (like telekinesis), with the three remaining classes being hybrids of these archetypes.

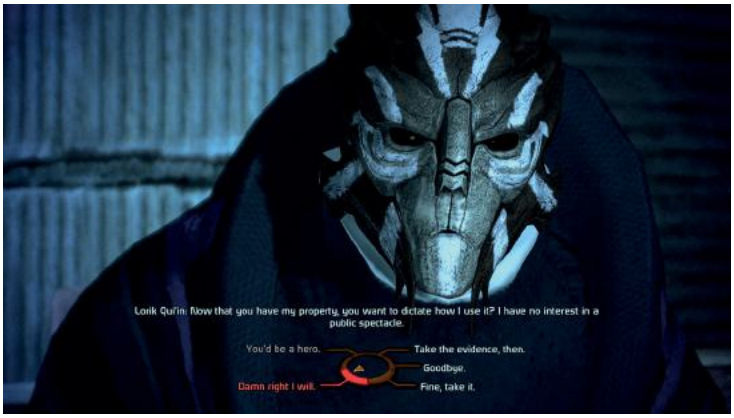
Once you're done, the game truly begins, and you'll immediately notice how BioWare did everything to make the game as cinematic as possible, from the camera angles during conversations to the film grain filter the game uses. Another new feature is the Dialogue Wheel. Developers have always struggled to display the long dialogue lines of PC RPGs on a TV screen: the solution used here is to only display short paraphrases of the dialogue lines, so the player quickly reads and chooses, then sees their choice spoken verbatim by Shepard.

The game follows BioWare's traditional formula, starting with an intro mission then opening into four locations the player must visit in any order to reach the ending. The difference is that when the game opens, you also gain control of your very own spaceship and can fly to various planets and systems to engage in side-quests, which fits perfectly with the game's concept.

As you travel to various planets, you'll eventually meet and recruit companions. *Mass Effect 1* has six of them, and they're easily the best BioWare made since *Baldur's Gate II*. While they wouldn't be fully developed until *ME2*, the cast is charismatic and memorable.

As the game advances, you'll get the chance to make several choices, which will often result in Paragon or Renegade points, a simple morality system inherited from *KotOR*. Most of them are rather superficial, only changing your mission reward or some extra dialogue line, but they create a decent illusion, thanks to some actually meaningful choices woven in between.

> “I can say that the reason *ME1* was so immersive is that we had the luxury of spending almost a year thinking up and fleshing out the universe (planets, technology, aliens, political and historical details) before we had to actually start writing the game. It let us really create something with a lot of depth.”
>
> *– Drew Karpyshyn,*
> Mass Effect*’s lead writer*



Lorik Qui'in: Now that you have my property, you want to dictate how I use it? I have no interest in a public spectacle.

You'd be a hero.
Take the evidence, then.
Goodbye.
Damn right I will.
Fine, take it.

Unique Paragon and Renegade dialogue choices can appear on the Dialogue Wheel depending on your character’s morality and dialogue skills

All this builds up to *Mass Effect*’s enticing call to adventure – you choose a new destination on the star map, travel there with your ship and go out exploring with two squad mates, meeting new aliens, locations and mysteries, all while making choices that define your story and bring you closer to your final goal.

It’s here that the spirit of games like *StarFlight* and *Star Control* is felt in force. You can survey planets and asteroids for valuable minerals and relics, as well as land on a few of them with the Mako, an all-terrain vehicle, for side-quests that range from killing pirates, bandits and aliens to trying to negotiate with rebels or just hunting more relics and minerals.

You cannot move freely in space – only jump from planet to planet – and sadly there’s no space combat. Most of these side-quests are also very formulaic, being set in similar locations and usually just boiling down to brief combat encounters. But there’s a nice effort to give them weight, as you learn about them by overhearing conversations and news broadcasts, hacking terminals or when fleet admirals directly contact you.

In fact, this is where *Mass Effect 1* stands out from the rest of the trilogy: the sense of scope. Shepard is not the “Space Jesus” they would later become, but rather the leader of a group of misfits working from inside the system to solve a threat that the system can’t handle.

While *ME2* and *ME3* would greatly improve the gameplay, adding more engaging combat, enhanced graphics and a much more polished overall experience, the series also lost something important in the process. It narrowed the setting and made everything revolve around Shepard, Reapers and Cerberus. And only that. So much so that *Mass Effect: Andromeda* (2017) had to do a “soft reboot”, travelling to a whole new galaxy.

Mass Effect 1 still indulges in player-pandering and some power fantasy clichés from time to time – especially during its overly dramatic ending – but most of the time it succeeds at painting an overwhelmingly large universe. One where humanity is just a young, second-class race that recently unlocked space travel.

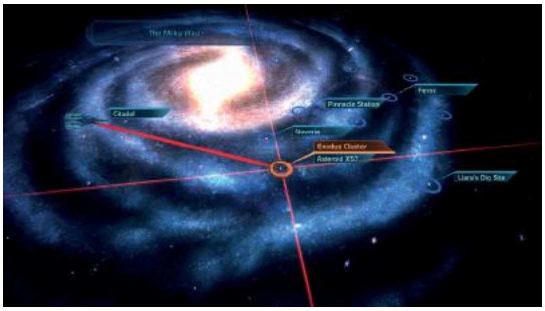
Setting-wise, *Mass Effect 1* is the series is at its best. It presents a galaxy filled with possibilities, interesting creatures and mysteries, all waiting to be uncovered by those brave enough to reach to the stars. **FE**

***In 2021 BioWare released *Mass Effect Legendary Edition*, a remaster of the entire trilogy for PC, PS4 and Xbox One, with improved graphics and a few quality-of-life features.**

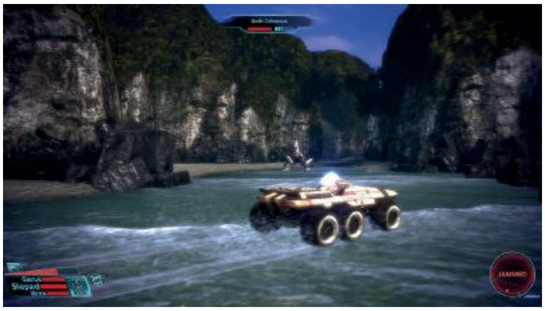
Mods:

MEUITM: The *Mass Effect Updated/Improved Textures Mod* greatly improves the game’s visuals, adding high-res textures and new shaders.

A Lot of Textures (ALOT): A complementary texture pack for MEUITM. Also available for *ME2* and *ME3*.

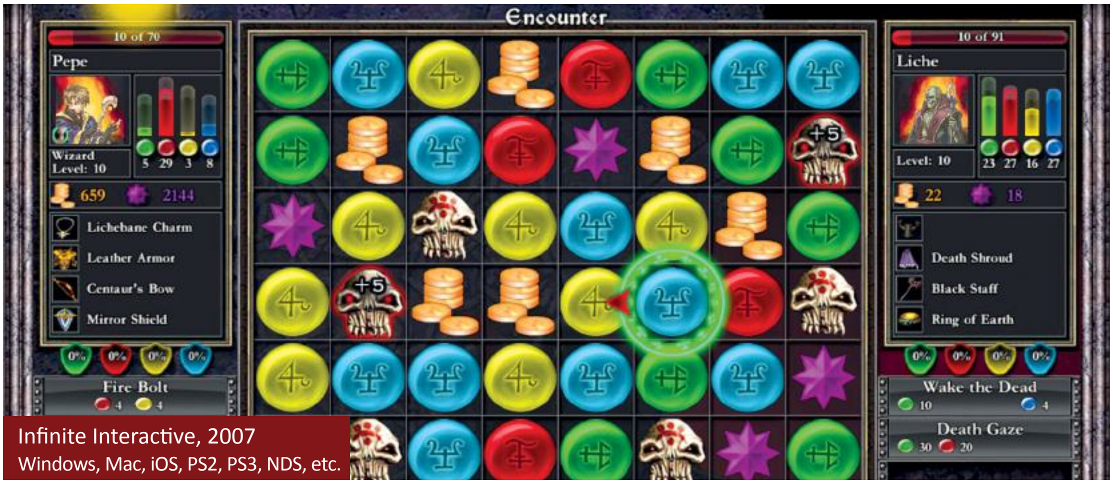


You get your own spaceship and can freely explore the galaxy, doing side-quests or searching for rare resources



The Mako is an all-terrain vehicle you’ll get to drive when landing on uncharted planets and in hostile environments

Puzzle Quest:
Challenge of the Warlords

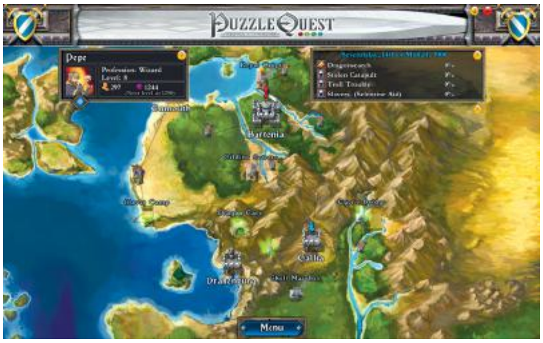


Infinite Interactive, 2007
Windows, Mac, iOS, PS2, PS3, NDS, etc.

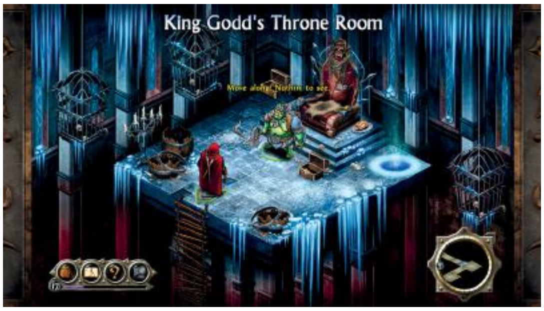
Steve Fawkner was once known as the man behind the *Warlords* series. But, for a younger generation, he's the creator of *Puzzle Quest*, the puzzle RPG in which you battle foes in a *Bejeweled*-style game.

Combat in *Puzzle Quest* takes place on an 8 × 8 board where the aim is to match three or more tiles of the same type. Each tile has a different function: coins give you money, purple stars give XP, skulls deal direct damage to the opponent and the coloured globes serve as mana for spells. The satisfying aspect of the game comes from the simplicity of the core mechanic, combined with the skill required to chain multiple groups together, deny your opponent access to mana and earn extra turns.

***Puzzle Quest* had an expansion called *Revenge of the Plague Lord.* It was released on consoles, but never reached the PC. Fans then made an unofficial port of the Xbox version.**



The world map expands as you progress, and there are usually many different quests to choose from



Puzzle Quest 2 trades the 2D map for a beautiful isometric dungeon with various levels

There are four character classes available – Druid, Knight, Warrior and Wizard – each with their own set of spells and passive skills. Spells range from dealing direct damage to altering tiles on the board and even taking multiple turns at once. You unlock new spells by levelling up, but can only equip a maximum of six different spells. Choosing the right load of items and spells to counter your foe is of vital importance, and experimentation is encouraged.

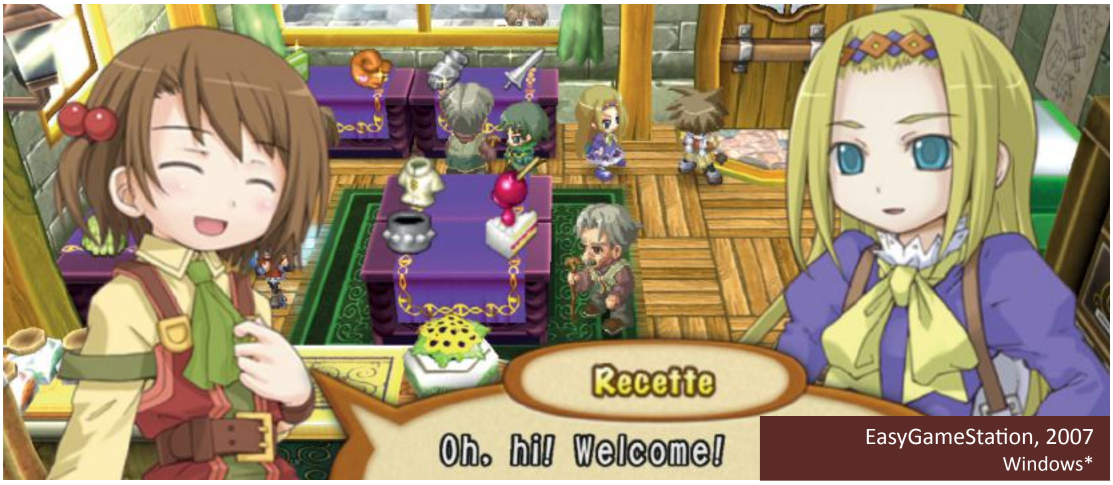
Exploration is done through a 2D map with an appealing, painted art style. There you can visit towns, buy equipment, take quests and listen to rumours. The world is limited at first, but as you progress new areas are unlocked. Over time, enemies pop up and block routes, meaning you must either find an alternative way or fight them to progress.

The story itself is a little bit flat and your main motivation for the various missions is really just to gain XP and gold. There are four realms to visit, focusing on different factions, and these introduce new enemy types to fight or capture. Some quests offer you choices, and you can gain companions who provide handy support abilities, such as damaging an enemy as the battle begins.

The big appeal of *Puzzle Quest* is taking an already addictive puzzle game then adding depth and RPG elements to it. Later in the game you can capture monsters to use as mounts, learn spells from enemies, hunt treasures, craft your own magical equipment and even build siege weapons and conquer entire cities.

The formula became quite popular and led to a number of follow-up games, including *Puzzle Quest: Galactrix* (2009), which had a sci-fi setting and used hexagonal tiles – akin to *Hexic* – and *Puzzle Quest 2* (2010), a direct sequel with similar mechanics but focused on dungeon-crawling. **GE**

Recettear:
An Item Shop's Tale



EasyGameStation, 2007
Windows*

Recettear is a landmark in the video game industry – but not because of its gameplay or story, even if those too are quite satisfying. It stars Recette, a carefree girl who has inherited the task of opening a shop and making enough money to repay the monumental debt her father left behind.

With this unique premise, *Recettear* places the player as owner of a small shop in a typical RPG town, full of adventurers and surrounded by dungeons. Your job is to run the shop, purchasing items and reselling them for a profit.

At its core it's a very simple system, but has many nuances that add to the experience. For example, if you feature only expensive items and decoration, your shop will be considered too fancy, attracting fewer customers. There are also special events, such as days when certain types of item are in high demand.

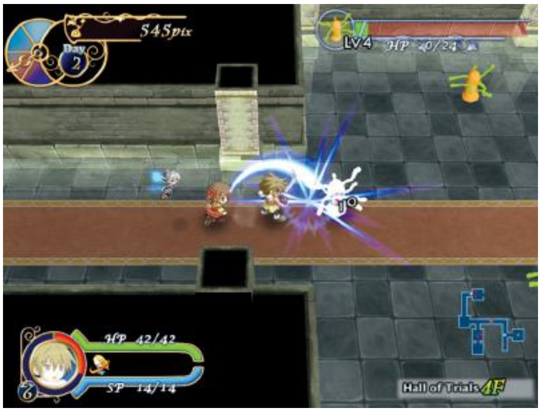
Over the course of the game, you'll meet various adventurers, whom you can hire to explore dungeons. Once you do, the game changes into an isometric action RPG, in which you explore randomly-generated levels, defeat enemies and collect treasure.

Many items can only be found inside dungeons, including ingredients to craft powerful weapons that you can either give to your adventurers or sell at a high price. The dungeons have few enemies and can get repetitive, but there are also boss fights every five levels to keep things interesting. Since there's a time limit to pay the debt, you'll have to keep a tight schedule, setting aside time to run the shop, buy supplies, explore dungeons and talk to the townsfolk.

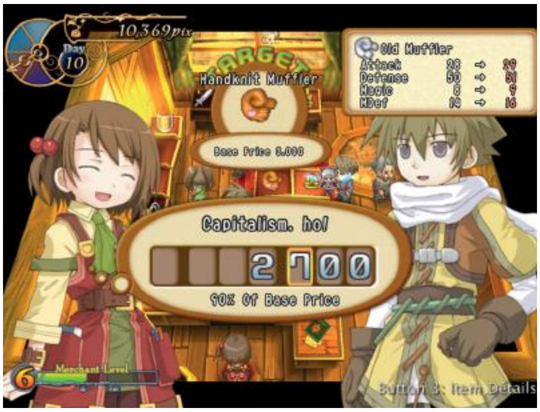
Recettear also features lots of post-game content, with extra dungeons and boss battles, two New Game+ modes and the hellish Survival Mode, where each week you must pay increasingly high debts, trying to keep the shop open as long as you can.

First released at the 73rd Comiket, a Japanese festival that celebrates *doujin* culture (manga, games and general crafts done by amateur groups), *Recettear*'s main legacy is being the first of these Japanese indie titles to ever be translated into English and released on Steam, thanks to localisation studio Carpe Fulgur. In doing so, *Recettear* went from a rare import-only title to a worldwide hit, paving the way for many other localisation studios and *doujin* games to follow. **FE**

***Recettear* was first released in 2007, and then localised into English by Carpe Fulgur in 2010.**

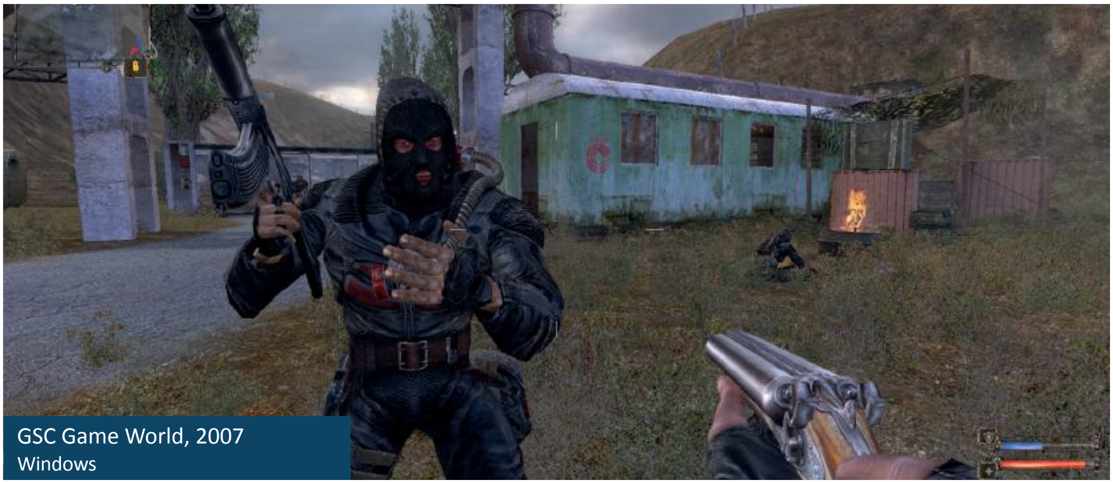


The combat is very simple but every adventurer plays differently, and some floors have special conditions



A poor adventurer asks for an expensive item; do you lower the price to equip him better, or do you prioritise your profit?

S.T.A.L.K.E.R.:
Shadow of Chernobyl

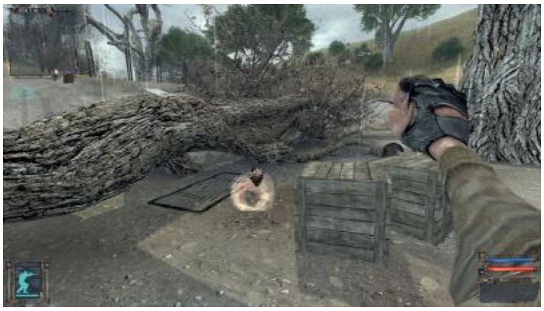

GSC Game World, 2007
Windows

STALKER is loosely based on the Soviet sci-fi novel _Roadside Picnic_ (1972), by Arkady and Boris Strugatsky. The same novel also inspired the 1979 film _Stalker_, by Andrei Tarkovsky.

Before *Far Cry 2* and *DayZ* challenged players with their unrelenting ecosystems, Ukrainian studio GSC Game World created *STALKER*, an FPS/RPG hybrid set in an alternate-reality version of the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone.

Struck by a second disaster, the Zone is now home to mutants and anomalies that defy the laws of physics – as well as valuable radioactive artefacts hunted by "stalkers". As the amnesiac Marked One, the player will be advancing through the Zone's large open world in their quest to hunt down a figure called Strelok. Each of the Zone's regions comes with unique obstacles and points of interest, offering plenty of opportunity to interact with NPCs, trade items or scavenge loot in warehouses and underground labs.

STALKER blends several styles of gameplay, such as FPS, RPG, survival horror and sandbox. During combat it distinguishes itself with tactical elements like stances, stealth and leaning, and by applying realistic physics to every shot. Lifelike hit damage and wide open spaces mean that the intense gunfights can end as soon as they start, reinforcing the sense of fragility. Players must leverage their resources and play carefully if they are to emerge relatively unscathed from the already hellish game world.


The Zone is filled with anomalies, such as unstable gravitational fields and high-temperature patches; to help navigate around them, you can throw metal bolts as you walk

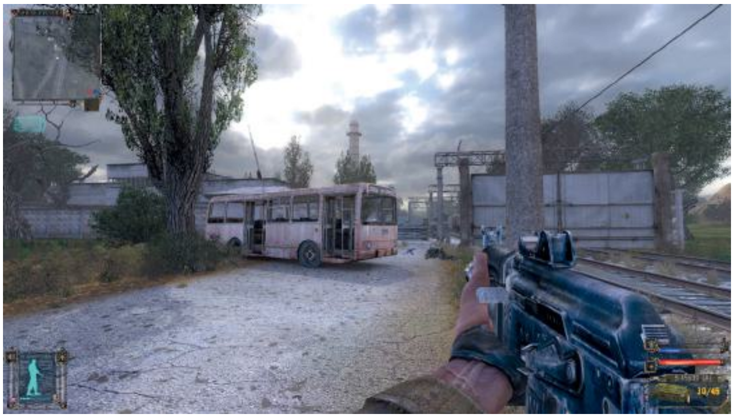
While there's no RPG-style XP/level-up system, equipment and inventory management are vital. There are several types of weapon, ammo and armour available, but their weight and durability must be carefully considered. Players also have to deal with hunger, bleeding, radiation and other types of hazard. The artefacts scattered across the Zone can be used to boost resistances, though usually with a drawback (e.g. reducing radiation but increasing bleeding).

Sadly, interaction with NPCs is usually limited to just accepting quests, trading or asking about rumours. However, *STALKER* does offer several different endings based on the player's reputation with the Zone's factions and NPCs, as well as how they chose to act in certain important story quests.

From bandits and mutants to pockets of radiation and anomalies, the Zone offers many dangers, the biggest of them being its systemic nature. *STALKER*'s A-Life engine gives every NPC in the game a dynamic routine set by personal goals. Whether it's bandits fighting lone stalkers or rabid dogs charging into settlements, events can be spontaneously triggered even when the player's not around, giving the Zone a sense of place and generating new quests.

In spite of its oppressiveness, the Zone plays host to an eerie sense of wonder and beauty. From guitars being played near campfires to the day-night cycle that showcases striking lighting effects, *STALKER*'s world acts as a picturesque allegory of Mother Nature reclaiming her property. Soviet-era ruins stand out from the fauna and flora, evoking feelings like those in lost history titles such as *Metro 2033*. Because *STALKER* rewards constant exploration, the player gradually becomes acquainted with their environment, allowing them to take in the scenery and contemplate the Zone's threatening and alluring nature.

> "[The player] is not limited by shooter-standard corridor limits; he can act at his will and see how the outer world reacts to his doings. We are very glad we managed to implement the unusual mix of FPS and RPG, integrating the elements of stealth, horror, so as to provide a unique playthrough to each of the players."
>
> *– Anton Bolshakov,*
> STALKER: SoC*'s project lead*



The moody lighting effects and grim soundscape lend uncanny beauty to the vast Zone

STALKER isn't without its fair share of faults. Combat can abruptly shift from challenging to punishing with the slightest tactical misstep, especially against humans whose resilience can prove unfairly advantageous even when using the same gear as the player. Backtracking can become a chore when carrying too much loot, and technical oddities can lead to broken quests and wonky AI. A fitting metaphor for the Zone's unpredictability, one might say, but these issues can be easily eliminated with the game's numerous fan-made mods and patches.

Shadow of Chernobyl would go on to spawn two additional games, *Clear Sky* and *Call of Pripyat*. *Clear Sky* (2008) is a prequel that introduces gear customisation and a faction system, allowing players to take sides in a war and help capture strategic points or remain neutral. *Call of Pripyat* (2009) is the most polished entry, with improved AI, UI, quests and stealth gameplay, but is also the most streamlined.

As engaging as these games are, their atmospheres fail to replicate the harsh oppressiveness of *Shadow of Chernobyl*. Still, the *STALKER* series is known for its extensive library of mods, and while the original game remains the best vanilla experience, excellent mods like *Misery* and *Call of Chernobyl* recently turned *Call of Pripyat* into a must-own for fans.

The greatest achievement of *STALKER: Shadow of Chernobyl* is its peerless transplantation of survival horror to an open world. Like the Zone itself, the game is foreboding and relentless, but beneath its intimidating facade lies a captivating sandbox that invites players to explore its nooks and crannies, presenting opportunities to bolster their gear and unravel the mystery behind one of the eeriest locales in both gaming and human history. **MIS**

STALKER: Shadow of Chernobyl Mods:

Zone Reclamation Project: A large bug-fix pack with no further changes. Recommended for a first playthrough.

Autumn Aurora 2: Greatly improves the graphics, tweaks gameplay and UI and includes the *Zone Reclamation* mod. A good all-in-one pack if you want better visuals.

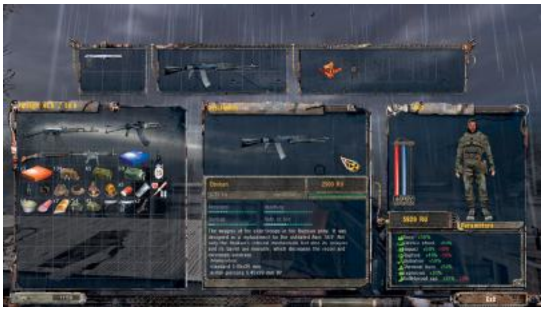
Lost Alpha: A free, fan-made stand-alone game based on concepts *STALKER* had early in its development.

STALKER: Call of Pripyat Mods:

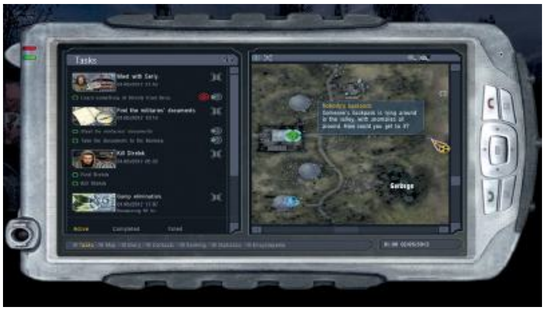
Misery: The most popular of all *STALKER* mods, it turns *Call of Pripyat* into a hardcore survival game.

S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Call of Chernobyl: Combines the maps of all three games into one massive sandbox game using *Call of Pripyat's* engine. Also has many of its own mods.

Originally announced in 2001, *STALKER* suffered many revisions before being released. Some features, such as a faction wars system, were cut from the final build and later reintroduced in the sequels.



Artefacts can give several types of bonus, like increased burn resistance, but they usually come with a drawback



Your PDA tracks quests and can also display information about hidden caches learned from looted enemies' PDAs

Neverwinter Nights 2: Mask of the Betrayer

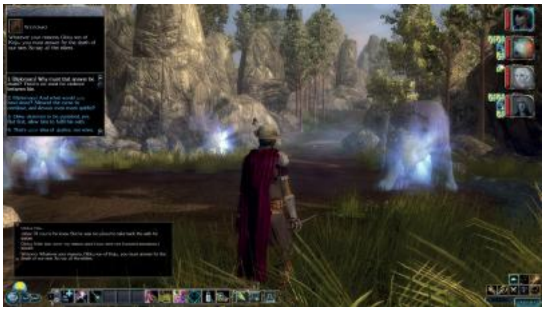
Obsidian Entertainment, 2007
Windows

Mask of the Betrayer is the story-focused expansion to *NWN2.* That's not to imply that it's a graphic novel, but rather that the changes introduced are all in service of the story.

It included extra content such as classes and races that can naturally be used in modules and such, but at its core it is a single-player product. While the original campaign was about a group of adventurers saving the world, *MotB* is about you escaping a curse that threatens to devour your soul with the help of people similarly driven by personal goals.

The expansion's story is mostly unrelated to the original's, and while you will miss a reference or two there is absolutely no requirement that you play *NWN2* beforehand – unless you want a tutorial, as *MotB* begins at Level 20 and goes all the way to 30. This can overwhelm those new to *D&D* rules, but also provides a much wider variety of crazy character builds, including new epic feats and spells.

Much like the original campaign, this one is split into three acts. The first and last are fairly short, consisting only of the introduction and ending, whereas Act 2 is fairly large and open-ended, with plenty of optional content. Unfortunately, thanks to the inherent power of the "epic levels" (above Level 20), you'll likely be fairly overpowered after Act 1.



Many powerful spirits inhabit the Rashamen lands; diplomacy is often possible, but you'll also need to feed to stay alive

While the challenge suffers after Act 1, it's also when *MotB* begins to truly shine, for it is here that the Spirit Meter manifests. Put simply, it's a measure of how much spirit energy your character has – energy that's constantly being drained by a curse. As it drains you'll receive various stat penalties and eventually die.

To counteract this, you must suppress the hunger with your will, or by consuming spirits. Spirits are thankfully plentiful in the Rashamen lands where a lot of the campaign takes place, but its inhabitants do not take kindly to you eating their spirit friends.

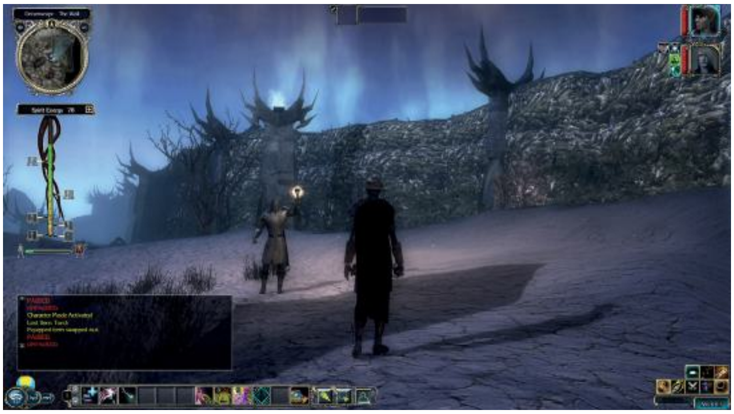
Around the time of *MotB*'s release, the Spirit Meter was the subject of much scorn from both press and players. The chief complaint was that managing the meter was very hard. This perceived difficulty is blown out of proportion, however. If you treat your curse without due consideration, you will die or be forced to sacrifice parts of your soul (XP) to survive. But, treat it with the respect that the game's setting, lore and characters say you should, and you will survive, even if you do not thrive.

The Spirit Meter is reason enough for *MotB* to be remembered and studied (aside from its excellent writing). With it, Obsidian succeeded at something few game developers attempt: entwining the game's narrative and mechanics in a compelling way. In both the story and the gameplay you are under constant threat of succumbing to the curse, giving you ample reason to push forward. This lends meaning to the events of the game, as you feel yourself struggling with the same problems that your character deals with.

The constant drain also limits the player's resting, preventing the constant replenishing of hit points, spells and abilities – an issue that often plagues *D&D* games. Unfortunately, the epic levels allow for characters so powerful that resting rarely matters.

"On *Mask,* my goal was to make the companions feel unusual and different, partly to reinforce the player's impression of being a stranger in a strange land. Okku was mostly inspired by the giant animal gods in *Princess Mononoke*. When I first saw that movie in the early 2000s, I wanted to *be* one of those guys in a game… or failing that, I wanted to travel with one."

– George Ziets,
Mask of the Betrayer*'s creative lead*



You'll journey across the planes to exotic places such as the Wall of the Faithless, where those without a god are sent to suffer after death

Thankfully, Obsidian delivered a great narrative alongside its Spirit Meter. While *NWN2*'s campaign was a poorly paced save-the-world plot, *MotB* borrows heavily from *Planescape: Torment*, presenting a short and personal story of searching for answers to your curse. The game graciously takes advantage of often overlooked aspects of *D&D*'s settings, such as the nature of the gods and the extra-dimensional planes. This provides many interesting vistas and dungeons to explore, from temperate forests to death vaults, from shadow planes to the insides of dreams.

The characters that join you are also unique and generally very well-written. You may travel with three of five companions (two of them mutually exclusive): a half-celestial cleric, a Red Wizard of Thay, a dream-walker shaman, an undead abomination made of convicted souls and, last but not least, a Bear God, king of animal spirits.

The companions will react to your actions and choices – please them and they will impart various boons, antagonise them and they might leave. They very rarely ask you to pick sides amongst themselves, but each has a personal goal which drives them. These come with a suitably big influence swing, but may be a suboptimal action for you. Just be mindful that they may even attack you if you cross them.

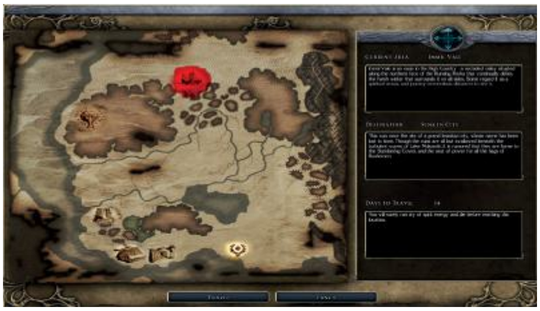
Besides companion interactions and a healthy amount of choice regarding quest resolution, a large part of role-playing in *MotB* revolves around how you choose to view the curse. It's slowly sucking your life, but it also bestows on you the power to devour spirits (and other abilities players might uncover by learning to control the curse).

Sadly, the simplistic nature of *D&D*'s alignment system largely removes the moral depth this choice could have had. Still, *MotB* has the most satisfying evil path of any game I've played, and there are multiple endings (and ending slides) to fit your choices.

Simply put, *Mask of the Betrayer* is brilliant. The writing is of high quality and refreshingly original. The way the gameplay and story are tied together by the Spirit Meter is excellent, and I hope it is remembered in the future. Building and planning your character is as much fun as ever. And even more nice things are hidden in the details: a stellar bit of voice acting here, a cool role-playing choice there, a powerful unique item hiding behind that.

The combat may be too easy and the gameplay mostly mediocre but, with so much other good stuff in the game, does it even matter? **JA**

TIP: use cheats or mods to get all companions into your party at the same time. Combat is easy regardless, and there's no point missing out on their excellent dialogue.



You're free to explore the world in search of clues, but must pay attention to the Spirit Meter during your travels

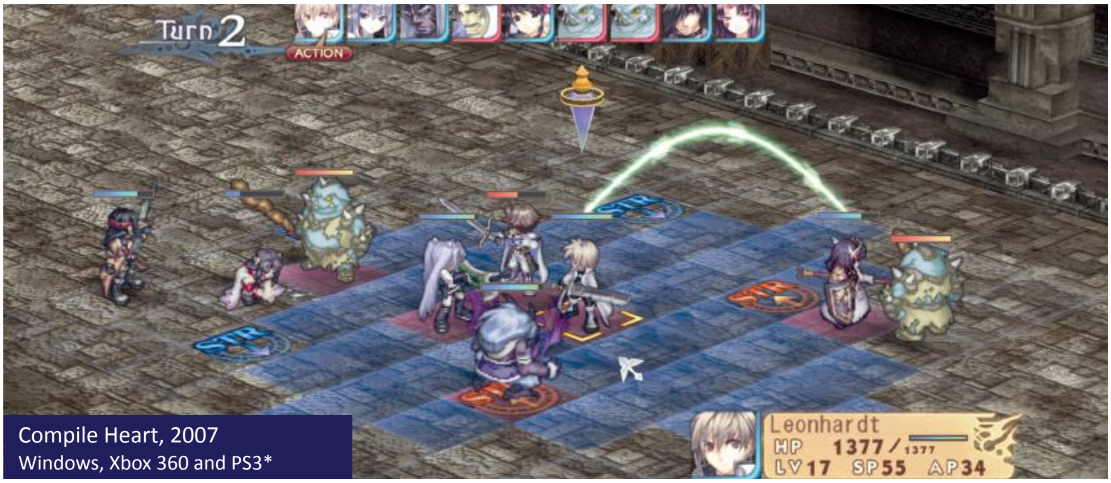
Mods:

MotB Makeover SoZ Edition: A complex mod that adds features introduced in *NWN2: Storm of Zehir,* such as full party creation (up to eight characters), companion multi-classing and an expanded crafting system. Save for a replay, as it changes the game a lot.

Rooster Cheat: Removes the party limit, allowing you to travel with four companions. A mod for those who value story and role-playing over combat.

Romance Pack: Allows you to romance some of your companions, and adds extra scenes tying up possible romances from *NWN2*'s original campaign.

Agarest:
Generations of War



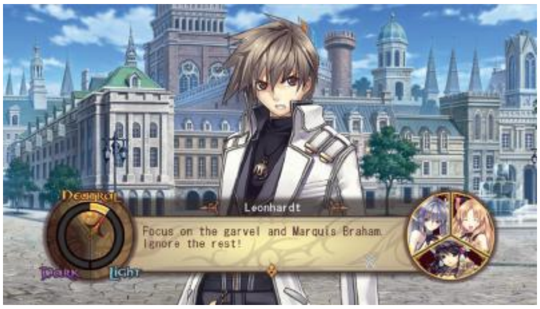
Compile Heart, 2007
Windows, Xbox 360 and PS3*

A very divisive title, *Agarest*'s main feature can be either its main draw or an irredeemable flaw: can you endure a journey that spans multiple generations of heroes and over a hundred hours?

The game is a tactical JRPG in which you control a party of up to six characters, fighting in extremely challenging turn-based battles. The game was clearly made for hardcore players, so expect tons of stats and equipment, an elaborate skill system, combo attacks, crafting, enchanting, monster capturing, formations, multiple routes, fan-service and a lot of grinding.

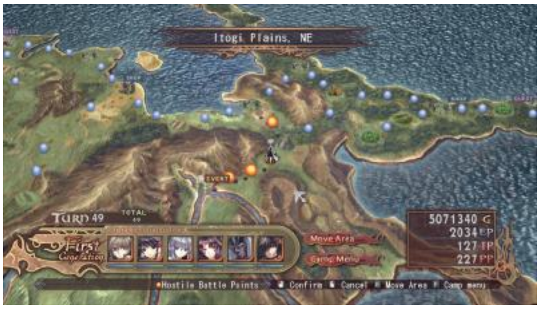
Along the way you'll meet a colourful cast of characters – including three romanceable heroines – and make a few decisions which affect your alignment, the battles you'll face and which girl likes you more.

***Agarest* was first released in 2007 in Japan for the PS3. It was localised into English for consoles in 2009, and then ported to PCs in 2013.**



Leonhardt
Focus on the garvel and Marquis Braham.
Ignore the rest!

The choices you make during the game will affect the battles you face, your alignment and your relationships with the three heroines of each generation



The orange dots on the world map are mandatory "filler" battles, which are far too frequent and will test your patience

After a few dozen hours, you reach the climax, battle evil, marry your girl of choice and have a baby. Other games would end here, but *Agarest* then flash-forwards until your son is all grown up, then you take control of him, ready to meet new companions, romance new girls and make a new stand against evil.

The game lasts for five of these generations, all working towards a final goal. Items, spells and some companions carry on, and the stats, weapons and looks of each generation's hero are determined by his parents', leading to some interesting long-term planning.

Inexplicably, despite its being five games in one, the developers decided to pad *Agarest*'s length. Thus, while the events and story battles are interesting, you'll waste an ungodly amount of time in pointless filler fights. Moreover, the game is repetitive and really starts to drag after the 3rd generation. I honestly can't imagine the patience required to replay it multiple times to see all the routes and the secret "true ending".

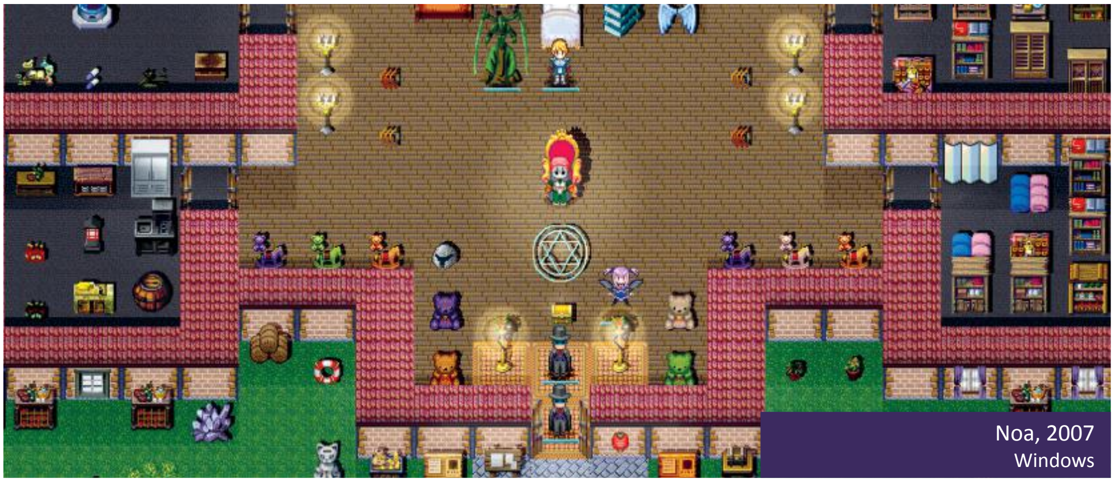
In 2009, a prequel, *Agarest Zero*, was released. It follows the same basic formula but reduced the filler combat and only has two generations. It also added character creation for the first hero and a lot of great post-game content – including an abridged version of the first game that removed all filler and choices.

Agarest 2 arrived in 2010 with better graphics, three generations of heroes and a new, more complex (but confusing) combat system based around combos.

It's hard to pick the best game – the first has the best characters, *Zero* polishes the gameplay and reduces padding while *Agarest 2's* fast-paced number-crunching combat might interest some players more.

Regardless, here's some advice: *Agarest*'s DLCs are pay-to-win, so disable all of them except for dungeons and extra costumes. Otherwise, you'll start the game extremely overpowered, ruining all the fun. **FE**

Elona



Noa, 2007
Windows

Elona, short for “Eternal League of Nefia”, is a free Japanese Roguelike with rather unconventional design choices – such as its open-world nature and the fact that death is not permanent.

Most typical Roguelikes are about exploring a single self-contained, randomly-generated dungeon, restarting from the beginning if you die. *Elona*, on the other hand, counts on the player holding on to one save file for dozens, or even hundreds of hours.

At first sight, *Elona* may look derivative. Many mechanics were borrowed from *ADOM* and it uses art assets taken directly from *RPG Maker* and *Stone Soup*. It also has a less serious tone, with chest-busters from *Aliens*, Big Daddies from *BioShock* and even Pokéball-like items you can use to capture monsters. But there’s an undeniable complexity underneath it.

While the game is pretty sparse when it comes to dialogue choices, its role-playing options go far beyond the typical “melee, ranged or magic” tropes seen in nearly every modern fantasy RPG.

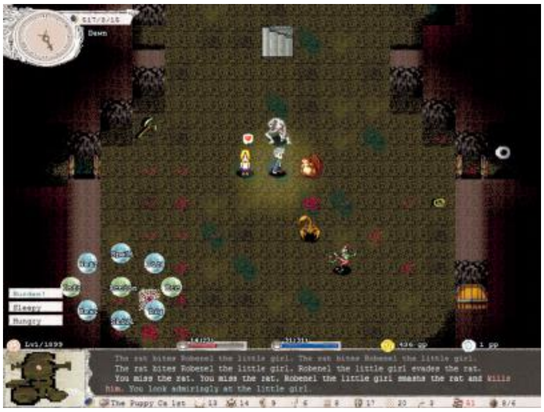
For example, it’s perfectly viable to play focusing on Charisma. Such characters may roam from town to town performing as a musician and earning money that way. They don’t even necessarily have to do battle – it’s often possible to run away, but high Charisma also means a greater capacity to employ hired mercenaries. Not interested in the life of a travelling musician? Charisma also makes it easier to get paid as a travelling merchant, or even a prostitute.

The game provides so many varied mechanics, random dungeons and side-quests that it’s very easy to get distracted from the main quest and pursue other interests. A player might run a farm, build a shop or even set up a museum. Investments can be made, but bills need to be paid every month. There are also allies and monsters you can recruit – or marry – or breed!

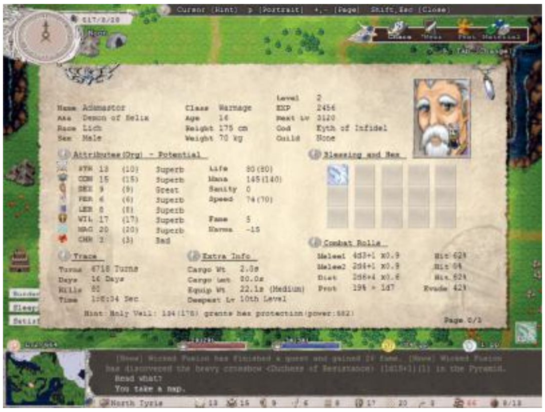
Moreover, sudden events like being affected by a dangerous mutagenic wind or having a town infested with aliens can completely alter your game, enforcing urgent objectives or unpredictable new powers.

This sandbox approach, the lack of permadeath, its 16-bit JRPG-like graphics and controller support all give *Elona* a very different appeal from that of other Roguelikes, but there’s more than enough freedom, depth and challenge here to please most RPG fans. **TM**

Noa moved on to work on a new game but made *Elona’s* source code available, leading to new versions. The most popular is *Elona+*, which is Japanese-only but has an English derivation called *Elona Custom*.

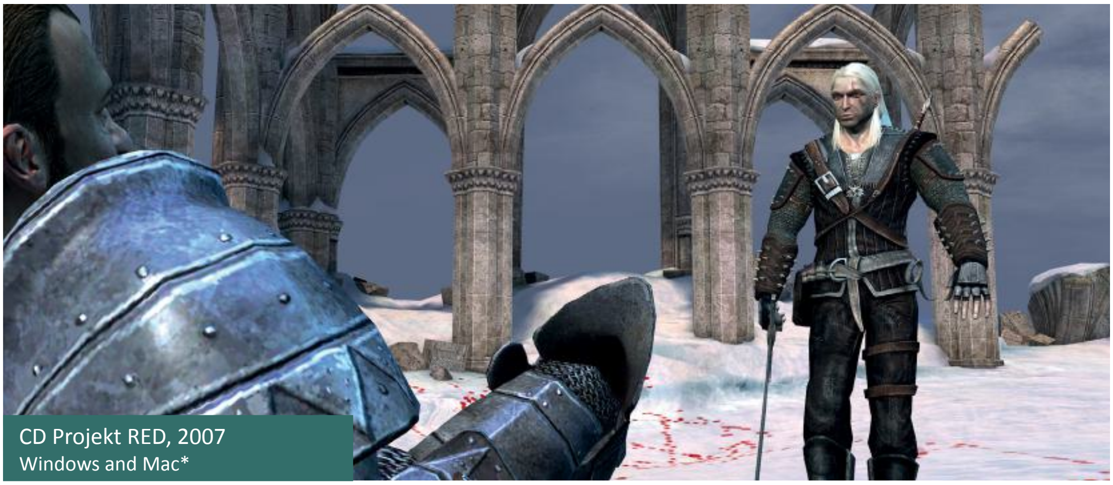


Its Japanese origins are clear: early on you can get a cat, dog, bear or little girl as a “pet”, and in *Elona+/Custom* you can even evolve the girl



Elona offers ten classes and eleven races, as well as several traits and feats, allowing for characters that can range from a Lich Warmage to a Fairy Pianist

The Witcher

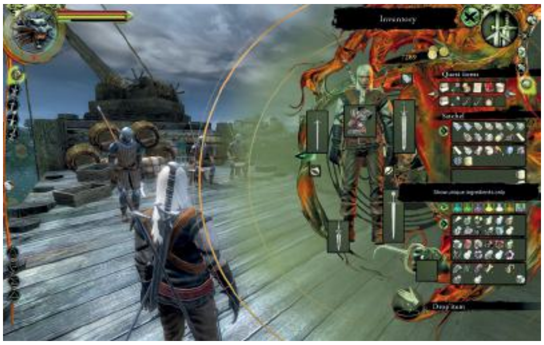

CD Projekt RED, 2007
Windows and Mac*

***In 2008, an Enhanced Edition of *The Witcher* was released, with countless improvements, new adventures, an improved editor and even optional fan-made mods. It was a free update for registered owners of *The Witcher*.**

The Witcher is a single-character action RPG based on Polish fantasy author Andrzej Sapkowski's series of novels featuring Geralt of Rivia, the eponymous witcher, a magically mutated monster hunter for hire. The plot follows Geralt trying to retrieve formulas and items required to create more of his kind, which were stolen during an attack on Kaer Morhen, a ruined fortress serving as a haven for the few remaining witchers. However, this turns out to be only one thread in a much more complex series of events, in which the protagonist gets involved.

The game was created by CD Projekt RED, the development studio of Polish game publisher and distributor CD Projekt. It was the studio's first release and clearly a work of passion, as it shows that the creators were fans of the book series. *The Witcher*'s faithfulness to the source material and attention to detail is remarkable, maybe a bit too much so, with some characters, ideas and dialogues clearly recycled from the books, sometimes with different names.

The Witcher was created on a highly modified version of *Neverwinter Nights*' Aurora Engine, but you probably would not notice that if it wasn't written in huge letters on the intro screens, as the graphics are vastly improved even compared to those of *NWN2*.



Geralt carries silver and steel swords, plus many potions, oils and bombs he can employ against certain enemies; you must study to know when to use which

Sound design is very good, and, while the bleak music may not be very appealing to listen to outside the game (unless you are trying to fuel your depression), it complements the game's setting perfectly.

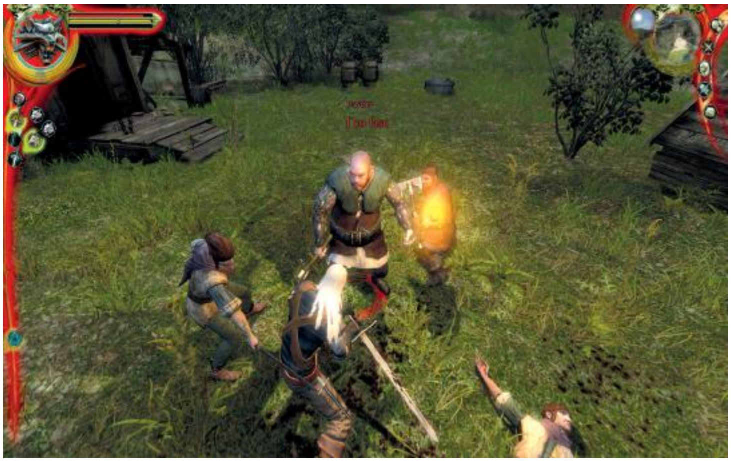
The world created by Andrzej Sapkowski is a place where happy endings are very few and far between. Its inhabitants are usually savvy enough to understand this, and try to cope using an (often dark) sense of humour and cynical attitude, only emphasised by the fact that almost nobody in the world cares about religion. This creates an interesting mix of classic fantasy and mature themes with a semi-serious approach – even if CD Projekt failed to avoid the trap of "mature equals sex, violence and profanity".

This is a world where monsters roam the countryside, with most people helpless against them. Human dominance has forced elves and dwarves to exist in ghettos or take up arms as guerrillas (or terrorists, depending who you ask). Mages reserve their miracle-working magic for elites, who can afford their services, while human and inhuman life is valued highly only by a select few.

Geralt is one of those people, as much as he wishes he was not. He tries to be a cold professional, but more often than not he ends up helping people, because nobody else will or can. He repeatedly tries to remain neutral in the affairs of the world and just do his job. In the novels he usually fails; in the game the player decides which path is the right one – or rather, the least wrong one.

While *The Witcher* is not an open-world game, each chapter puts Geralt into a fairly large area, which he can explore, interacting with its various inhabitants. Character progression is hand-waved as Geralt regains his skills and knowledge lost due to a near-death experience and subsequent amnesia.

> "We didn't want the vision of the game to be in any way distorted or dampened. An odd example of that occurred during a conversation with a publisher who said that, on account of their market research, players overall want their protagonist to be an Elvish woman and that if we had changed *The Witcher* accordingly they would have considered negotiating a contract."
>
> *– Michał Kiciński, CD Projekt's co-founder*



In combat you must pick which of three combat styles best suits the enemies, then carefully time your clicks to chain attacks

When levelling up, Geralt earns skill points of three types: bronze, silver and gold. These can be spent to improve his abilities, with higher levels requiring the rarer silver and gold ones to unlock.

As witchers are superhuman monster-hunters, Geralt is able to take on multiple enemies at once from the very start, using one of his two swords – steel against humans and their like, silver against monsters – and a fast, strong or group fighting style (which work well against agile, armoured and numerous opponents, respectively). Using other melee weapons is possible, but suboptimal, as Geralt's kill only works with his swords; ranged combat is not possible.

The game offers two camera modes for you to play in. Clicking on the enemy when in top-down view will cause Geralt to automatically close the distance and attack, while clicking on the ground will move him away and/or evade attacks. Over-the-shoulder camera makes controls more action-like, with manual, keyboard-controlled movement. In both modes well-timed button presses will chain attacks into combos, with increasingly more elaborate animations and higher damage as the protagonist's abilities increase.

Geralt also knows five simple spells called Signs, which can help him in a pinch and be upgraded by spending skill points. The toughest fights, however, require thorough preparation – learning about your target via books and NPCs, then using alchemy to brew potions that will temporarily boost Geralt's abilities and exploit the monster's weakness.

Most of the time, however, is spent talking to people living in the city of Vyzima and its rural surroundings. Over the course of his adventure, Geralt will meet all sorts of characters, and it's by interacting with them that players will get immersed in this rich world – solving many problems and pondering over morally grey issues – but also hearing gossip, fist fighting in taverns, playing dice and occasionally getting drunk in the company of good friends.

Because ultimately, this is what *The Witcher* is all about – becoming Geralt of Rivia and living his life for a little while. And it does it very well. **WM**

Mods:

CD Projekt released a toolset with the game, leading to some interesting fan-made adventures and mods:

Medical Problems I & II: A fantastic two-part saga in which Geralt must uncover the mystery behind a strange illness. Features multiple endings and over 15 hours of gameplay, with great writing and design.

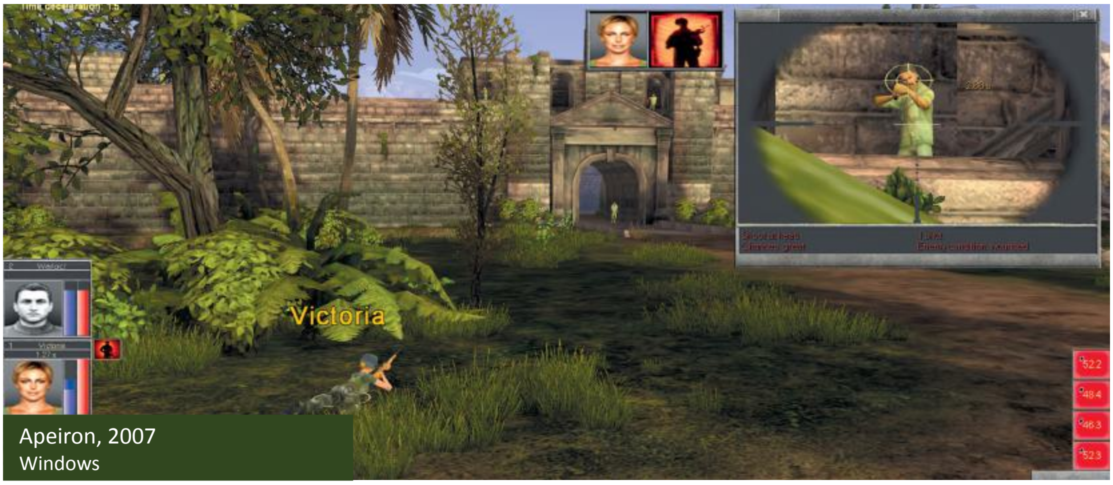
And a Curse, and Love, and Betrayal: One of the biggest fan-made *Witcher* mods, you must cleanse a mine and solve a lover's curse. About 12 hours long.

Full Combat Rebalance Mod: Completely revamps the combat, aiming to make it closer to the books. It was developed by Andrzej "Flash" Kwiatkowski, who also did *Flash's Witcher Mod*, which adds higher difficulty settings to the game, bug fixes and other features. He was later hired by CD Projekt Red.

***The Witcher* book series' popularity in Poland is way above that of any other fantasy franchise. One week after the game's long-awaited release, it was out of stock everywhere. One of *The Witcher* short-story collections, *The Last Wish,* remains the only Polish fantasy book adapted into a film (and a TV series).**

The Witcher features sex scenes and full-frontal nudity, which were censored on the US version

7.62 High Calibre



Apeiron, 2007
Windows

In 2008 Apeiron released *7.62: Reloaded*, a stand-alone expansion to *High Calibre*. Unfortunately, it's only available in Russia, but some of its content was included in the *Hard Life* mod.

Although it was released back in 1999, *Jagged Alliance 2* still reigns alone – a highly complex and detailed tactical game that to this day is still played by fans, with many mods still being made to keep the game alive. Many *JA2* wannabe games exist, but the consensus is that none can compare to what was achieved in *JA2* with mods, not even the recently released *Jagged Alliance Flashback*.

It turns out *JA2* also had a cult following in other corners of the world, and in 2005 a *Jagged Alliance* wannabe called *Brigade E5: New Jagged Union* was developed in Russia. It didn't do well with professional critics but developed a loyal fan base. Two years later, a sequel was released called *Brigade E6* (known as *7.62 High Calibre* in the US*)*, featuring less linear gameplay and various other changes.

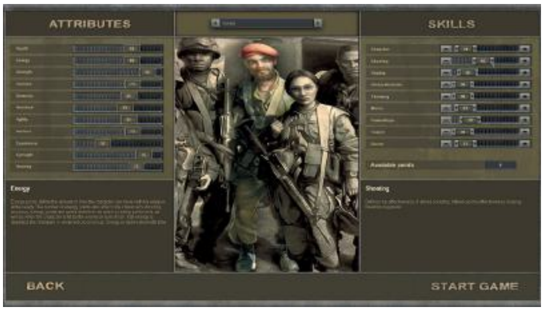
By far the most interesting part of the game is its combat system. Instead of using turn-based combat, like *JA2*, *High Calibre* features a unique real-time-with-pause system. The easiest way to explain it is that every single action takes time. For example, want to turn around? It will take you 0.20 seconds. Want to grab a med kit stored in your pockets? That's 0.89 seconds used up.

Every action in the game takes time, including the most basic ones like changing stance, picking up objects and, of course, firing your weapon. While this may sound clunky and messy, it actually makes the combat really deep. The player must make intelligent choices and calculate their timings to play effectively.

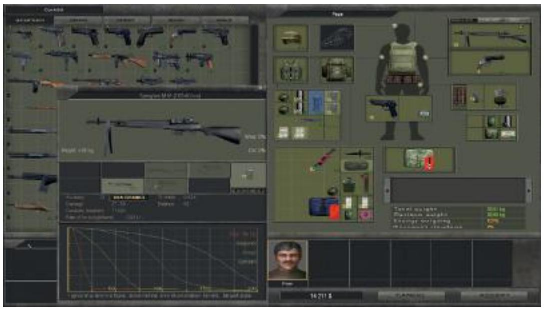
The amount of depth underneath the system is staggering – there are four shot types, six movement types, customisable firing modes, a locational damage system and multiple variables that alter the speed of each action. Even adrenaline plays a big role, making characters act faster, but less accurately.

Apart from the combat, another great feature is the number of weapons available. From pistols to light machine guns and sniper rifles, *High Calibre* features over a hundred weapons, a number of which can be further improved by installing mods.

Weapons have stats such as accuracy, magazine size and damage, but also other stats like the time it takes to aim them and their reliability. Unreliable weapons like the Colt M16 must be kept well-maintained and clean, or they might jam at the worst possible moment – meaning some players might prefer the legendary reliability of an AK-47 instead.



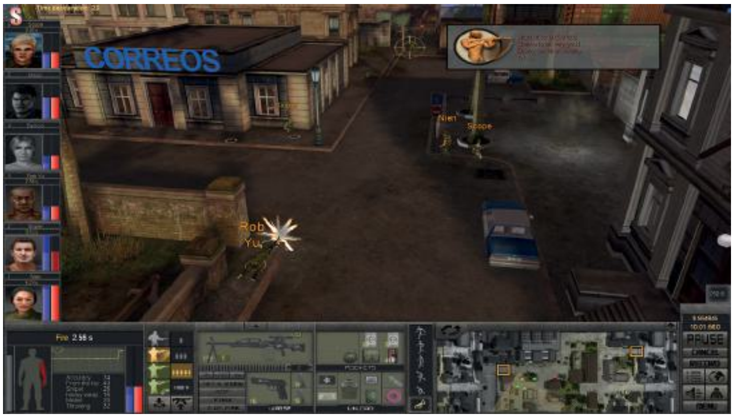
You can start as one of eight different mercenaries, each with a fixed set of attributes, but with customisable skills



It's vital to carefully maintain your guns, consider your loadout and optimise your pockets for quick access

"Each command performed by your soldier takes some time, real time. This time depends on soldier skills, his condition, and so on. All your soldiers perform their actions simultaneously with each other and enemy soldiers. This brings realism to the combat. Interruptions in turn-based systems are but an attempt to simulate this. Unsuccessful attempt, I should say."

– Dmitry Ivashkin,
High Calibre's lead programmer



Your stats, skills, injuries, adrenaline levels and even in which pocket you placed an item will all affect the speed of your actions

Stats also vary between the classes of weapons. Pistols are weak and inaccurate but are much faster to aim and fire, making them very good close-range weapons, when accuracy is not a problem. Some weapons can even have their stocks folded to make them faster to aim at the cost of reduced accuracy.

There are also many weapon accessories, such as flashlights, suppressors, foregrips, bipods, bayonets, underbarrel grenade launchers, laser sights and multiple types of scope. Some attachments also have weaknesses – laser sights and flashlights can make you more easily spotted by enemies, and using long-range scopes will reduce your field of view, making it easier for enemies to flank you.

With so many options, combat feels rewarding and fresh. This is fortunate, because the rest of the game is not so well-designed. Sadly, *High Calibre* suffers from various bugs and a boring FedEx-quest storyline filled with uninteresting characters and saved only by its exciting battles.

You'll start as a lone mercenary, hired to find a Russian businessman who is currently hiding in the North African nation of Algeria. *High Calibre* is an open, non-linear game, so you can move around the map to different cities, take multiple side-quests and side with either the rebels or the government forces.

Later on you'll be able to hire mercenaries to help you in battle, participate in highly intense battles to capture and control cities and other valuable areas, and also create militias to defend your locations from enemies. If they die, you will have to capture the area again in more high-intensity battles – an activity most *JA2* players should be used to.

Unfortunately, *7.62 High Calibre* isn't the *JA2* successor we have all been waiting for. However, with the help of a few mods, those into tactical battles can definitely still have a great time. **SG**

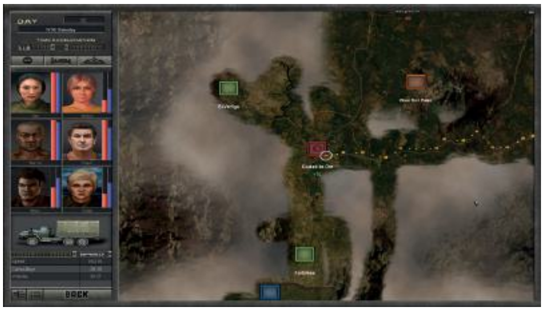
***The Blue Sun Mod* is endorsed by the developers and can be downloaded on Steam. Just enable it in the "Betas" menu.**

Mods:

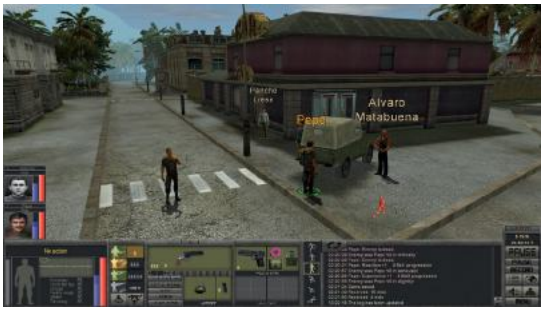
Blue Sun Mod: The best-known mod for the game, it adds a new quest line, more mercenaries to recruit, more maps, hundreds of new weapons, stat balancing and many essential bug fixes. Highly recommended even for first-time players.

Mercapocalypse: A merge of two popular mods, adds new mercenaries and over 350 new weapons. It also rebalances weapon stats and adds more diversity to enemy weapon usage. Requires the Blue Sun Mod.

Hard Life: A Russian mod designed for *7.62* veterans, it radically changes the game and adds lots of content. Was recently translated into English and released on Steam as a free enhanced edition for *7.62* owners.

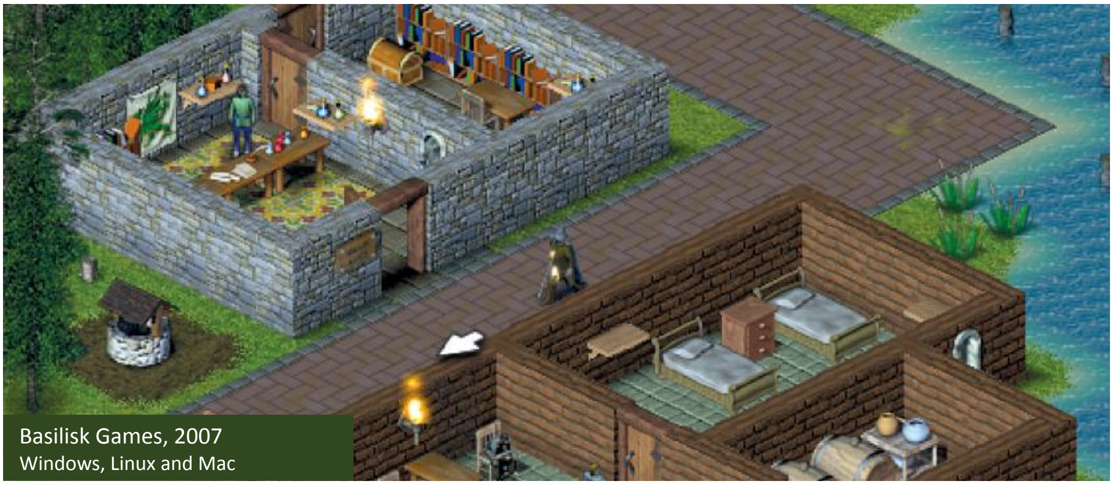


There are various locations to travel to, and you can buy a vehicle so you can go faster and store items in the boot



Inside cities you can take quests, hire mercenaries, buy weapons and even conquer or defend the whole city

Eschalon: Book I



Basilisk Games, 2007
Windows, Linux and Mac

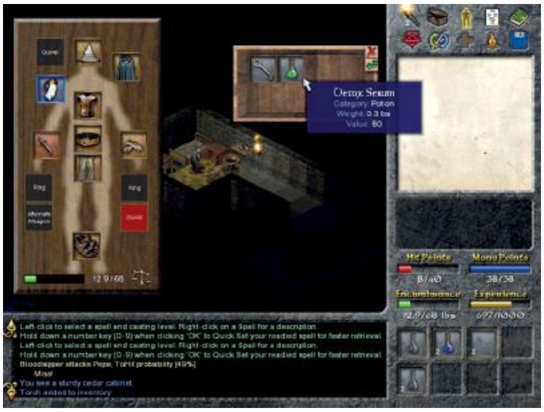
***Eschalon: Book I* became entirely free in 2017, in celebration of its 10th anniversary.**

When a lone developer started talking about this old-school fantasy RPG that he was working on back in 2005, most people didn't believe he could pull it off. Much to everyone's surprise, he not only released *Eschalon: Book I*, but also managed to release two more sequels.

"Old-school" describes the game pretty well: it looks like it walked straight in out of 1992. SVGA graphics, a clunky turn-based interface and very little obvious charm. But give the game a minute of your time and its true magic will show itself. *Eschalon* boasts an elaborate skill system that allows for several solutions to various problems.

The game mechanics follow clear and simple formulas and are easy to grasp, with special mention to how they seem to cater to thief-like characters, which is uncommon in RPGs. Locks sport various designs and levels of quality, but in many cases they can also just be smashed open with brute force.

The setting feels unimpressive and clichéd at first, starting with the tired trope of an amnesiac protagonist who wakes up in a ruined house.



Left-click to select a spell and casting level. Right-click on a Spell for a description.
Hold down a number key (0-9) when clicking "OK" to Quick Set your readied spell for faster retrieval.
Left-click to select a spell and casting level. Right-click on a Spell for a description.
Hold down a number key (0-9) when clicking "OK" to Quick Set your readied spell for faster retrieval.
Bloodsipper attacks Pepe, To-hit probability [49%]
Miss!
You see a sturdy cedar cabinet.
Torch added to inventory.

Light is very important in *Eschalon*, and its pitch-black nights and dark dungeons make torches essential equipment

A cryptic chain of letters guides him onto the main quest, which involves four powerful gemstones, and soon enough he's travelling across the lands, invading goblin strongholds and dwarven fortresses in order to prevent a cataclysm from taking place.

Probably the greatest feature of *Eschalon* is the freedom of exploration; there are very few artificial barriers in place to force the player along a pre-determined path. Instead the game opts for the more organic approach of giving travel advice via NPC conversations and readables. Only rarely are gates used to block further progress, and walking off the beaten path is often rewarding.

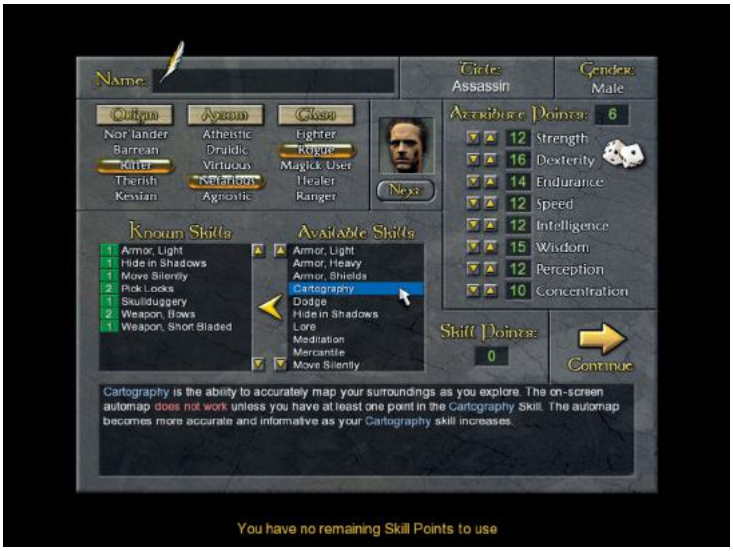
To help with the exploring, *Eschalon* sports a detailed automapping system, but asks that skill points be invested in the Cartography skill to use it. Sadly, there are no recruitable characters to help the player, and while the character dialogues aren't badly written I still couldn't shake the feeling that the NPCs are little more than quest dispensers or shopkeepers. At least some quests allow for multiple solutions.

But the bread and butter of the game is the combat. The turn-based system allows for a tactical approach, with the environment playing a vital role. Gates can be slammed down on monsters' heads and traps can be laid down in tight passages. Light, sound and line of sight also play a role, and, while other games make darkness your enemy, here it can be made an ally. With little effort, any character can become a proverbial ninja, striking unseen.

But, unfortunately, *Eschalon*'s versatile system is unbalanced to the point of being broken. Most of the spells in *Eschalon* outright replace various skills and equipment, rather than being sidegrades or buffs. Mage characters become nigh-unstoppable powerhouses as a result.

"What inspired me to start this project was actually the sheer disappointment that I have felt with the design of most modern RPGs. They are created with the idea of targeting as wide a demographic as possible, and, in doing so, they've shut out the niche market that gave birth to this genre in the first place. [...] With the *Eschalon* series, we hope to alleviate this lack of choice by offering an RPG that is inspired by the greatest ones of all time rather than trying to reinvent the genre all over again."

– Thomas Riegsecker,
Eschalon*'s creator*



Name:
Title: Assassin
Gender: Male
Attribute Points: 6
12 Strength
16 Dexterity
14 Endurance
12 Speed
12 Intelligence
15 Wisdom
12 Perception
10 Concentration

Known Skills:
1 Armor, Light
1 Hide in Shadows
1 Move Silently
2 Pick Locks
1 Skullduggery
2 Weapon, Bows
1 Weapon, Short Bladed

Skill Points: 0

Cartography is the ability to accurately map your surroundings as you explore. The on-screen automap does not work unless you have at least one point in the Cartography Skill. The automap becomes more accurate and informative as your Cartography skill increases.

You have no remaining Skill Points to use

Origin
Nor'lander
Barrean
Kitter
Therish
Kessian
Axiom
Atheistic
Druidic
Virtuous
Nefarious
Agnostic
Class
Fighter
Rogue
Magick User
Healer
Ranger
Next
Available Skills
Armor, Light
Armor, Heavy
Armor, Shields
Cartography
Dodge
Hide in Shadows
Lore
Meditation
Mercantile
Move Silently
Continue

Character creation features all the standards, plus options like choosing a home region and a religion

Skills also suffer from severe balance issues, as some of them are only used in a handful of situations, or maybe even on just a single map.

As can be expected, the game improves with the sequels. *Eschalon: Book II* was released in 2010 and strikes a good balance between having more of the same and adding new things, like overhauling the UI (so now it looks like a 1993 game) and adding in-game weather. The neatest addition is the customisable difficulty level; this includes options such as weapons wearing down with use, and hunger and thirst meters.

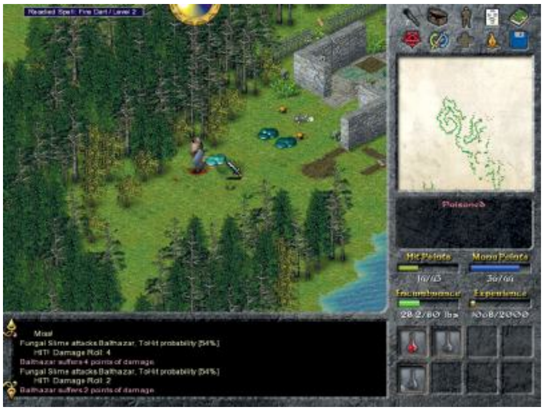
In contrast, *Eschalon: Book III* (2014) feels like it was rushed out the door. Sporting only minor improvements to the game mechanics, the game is clearly only half-finished as the ending comes abruptly and the writing takes a nosedive in quality, to the point of making the whole story anticlimactic and disappointing.

The game's ending goes so far as to make the other two games in the series feel irrelevant, which frankly is unforgivable. Combine that with overall poor graphical support (none of the games supports widescreen resolution) and it becomes clear that the third game was neglected by the developers.

Sadly the poor performance of the third game has all but killed further support and goodwill for the *Eschalon* trilogy, leaving it hanging by a thread when it needed a lifeline. **ÁV**

Fan-made Editor:

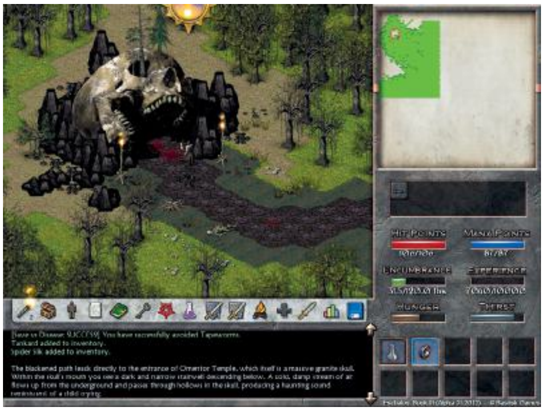
In 2008, an unofficial character and map editor was created by *Eschalon*'s community member, xolotl. Since then, the editor has been officially endorsed by Basilisk Games, and modders have already created a dozen small mods for *Eschalon: Book III*.



Miss!
Fungal Slime attacks Balthazar. ToHit probability [54%]
HIT! Damage Roll: 4
Balthazar suffers 4 points of damage
Fungal Slime attacks Balthazar. ToHit probability [54%]
HIT! Damage Roll: 2
Balthazar suffers 2 points of damage

Poisoned
Hit Points
Mana Points
Encumbrance
Experience

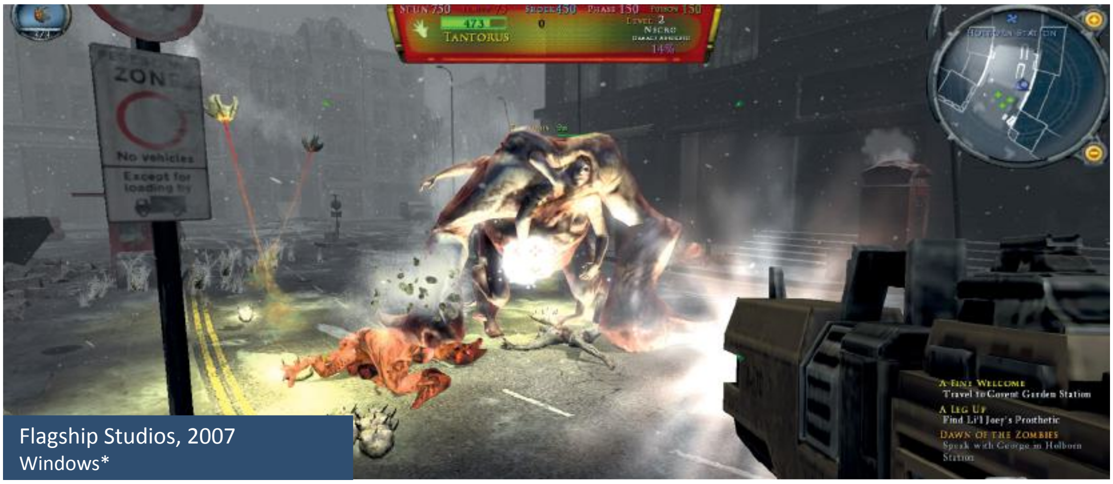
Combat is turn-based and somewhat simplistic, but it's agile and helps with keeping the pace of the game fun



Hit Points
Mana Points
Encumbrance
Experience
Hunger
Thirst

The sequels add small but welcome upgrades, such as difficulty customisation, item wear and a better UI

Hellgate: London

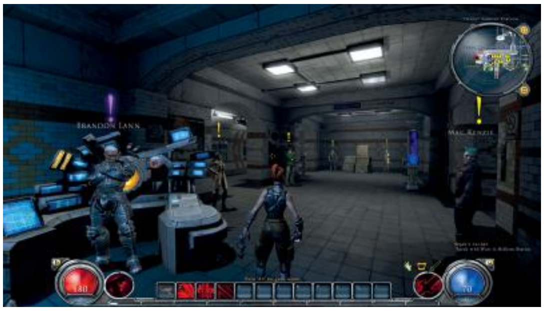

ZONE
No vehicles
Except for
loading by
TANTORUS
A Fine Welcome
Travel to Covent Garden Station
A Leg Up
Find Li'l Joey's Prosthetic
Dawn of the Zombies
Speak with George in Holborn Station

Flagship Studios, 2007
Windows*

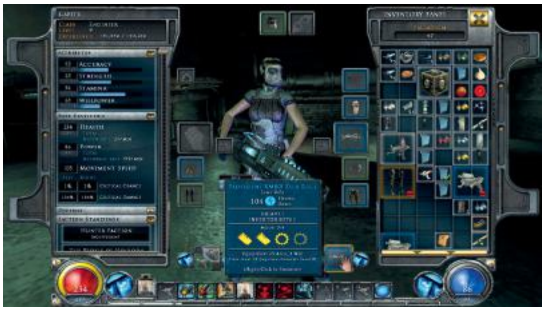
*Those willing to give the original *Hellgate: London* a try should use the *Revival* mod for better game balance and more content. And keep an eye out for the upcoming *London 2038* mod.

I clearly remember myself watching the fantastic trailer for *Hellgate: London*, awestruck by the promise of a *Diablo*/FPS hybrid where high-tech holy warriors fought hordes of demons in the ruins of a post-apocalyptic London. I would shoot flying demons with holy rifles and unleash spells from the balconies of gothic buildings, and the demons would fall, spewing out incredible amounts of loot!

At a quick glance the promises were delivered. *Hellgate*'s action is fast-paced; there are interesting weapons with unusual mechanics, plus cool monsters and bosses. The art direction is tight and consistent, darkness is used cleverly in some areas, buildings have several stories for you to traverse, and loot pours out of monsters like there's no tomorrow.



Hellgate uses London's Tube stations as hubs between random dungeons, but they only offer goofy NPCs and dull fetch quests



Weapons follow the classic *Diablo* coloured loot system and can be upgraded, but guns require neither bullets nor reloading

The game presents three archetypes to choose from, each divided into two sub-classes. Blademasters and Guardians are melee warriors; Summoners and Evokers are spellcasters; Marksmen and Engineers are ranged attackers. Depending on your weapons, you can switch between first- and third-person cameras.

With these features, former Blizzard developers at the helm and a fine marketing campaign, *Hellgate* was highly hyped and sold nearly a million copies.

Then came the fall. It quickly became evident to players that content was lacking – they were just walking in the same corridors and fighting the same monsters. The only thing that changed was their HP and damage, plus a few poorly-balanced skills.

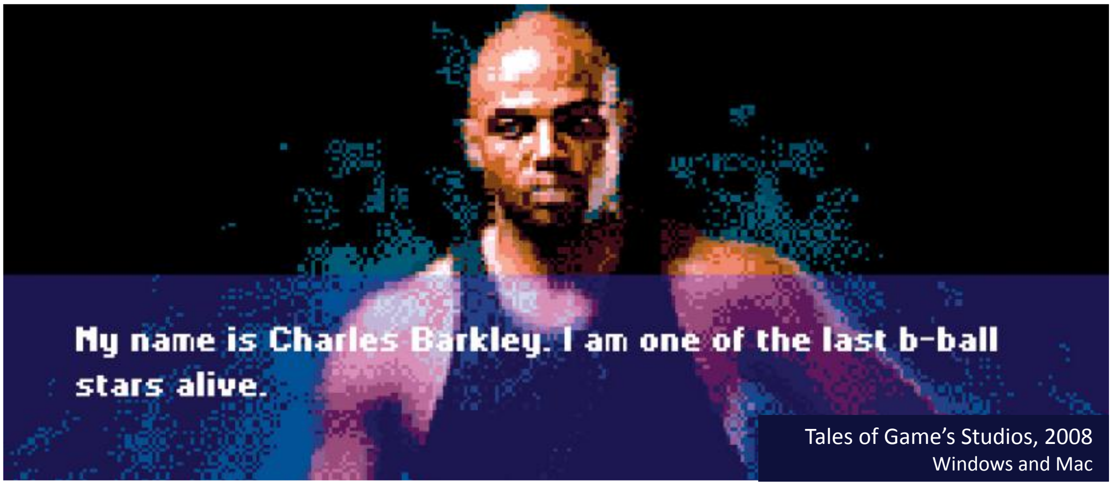
Valuing quantity over quality, the designers had over-relied on MMO-type fetch quests – everything was based on "collect this artefact", "kill this monster" and "collect X body parts from Y type of monster".

Like *Diablo II*, the game could be played either online or offline, but only those paying a monthly "Elite" subscription of $10 (or a lifetime fee of $149) would get content updates, such as new dungeons and items. Regardless, all players had to deal with server issues, character resets, crashes and bugs.

And so, a year after *Hellgate*'s release, Flagship went bankrupt, closing the game servers soon after. A Korean company then bought the game and re-launched it in 2011 as *Hellgate Global* – this time free-to-play and with new Tokyo areas. Criticised for its "pay-to-win" progression, it lasted until January 2016. It then changed hands once again, being re-released on Steam in 2018 as a cut-down, single-player-only game.

Few games get this much hype and many chances, but, despite a brilliant concept, *Hellgate: London* failed to deliver. *Borderlands* (2009) would soon prove just how well "*Diablo* with guns" could work. **BA**

Barkley, Shut Up and Jam: Gaiden


My name is Charles Barkley. I am one of the last b-ball stars alive.

Tales of Game's Studios, 2008
Windows and Mac

B-Ball. B-Ball never changes. The year is 2053. Basketball is dead. Ravaged by the power of the Chaos Dunk, countless innocents had their lives inadvertently taken by Charles Barkley.

Basketball became forbidden, putting the sport into disarray. In the same year, the storm of dunking came again – a mysterious player reduced Manhattan to cinders. From the ashes of slamming devastation, a veteran of basketball would struggle to arise. Life in the Cyberpocalypse is about to change.

Barkley, Shut Up and Jam: Gaiden is difficult to describe. It's a comedic RPG, and yet the world and its characters take themselves very seriously. Inspired by *Chrono Trigger* and *Earthbound*, the game presents a bizarre trip around Neo New York and its surrounding areas, with quests and characters that can go in outlandish directions.

You'll write poetry, uncover the long-forgotten history of b-balls and realise the full potential of the Chicken Dew. If a talking fuel pump lectures you on the sublime nature of *Chrono Cross*, things have clearly taken a turn for the strange. The writing is a strange amalgamation of basketball references, allusions to JRPGs, and just about everything else in between.

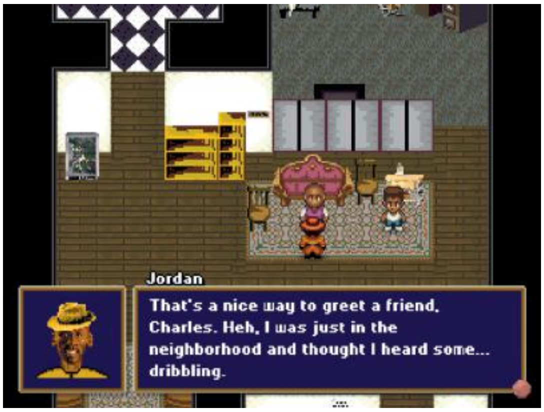
The combat is the traditional turn-based JRPG fare, with up to four party members and several special attacks. The combat also embraces the absurdity of the setting. Clashing against Basketball Spiders, Zombie Referees and Robotic Killer Gatorades is a slice of what the developers came up with.

The special moves of your characters require special input that varies wildly between them in terms of gameplay, and it makes each scuffle feel unique instead of just another grind. Only in *Shut Up and Jam: Gaiden* could you breakdance with Uzis while curing a bad case of diabetes.

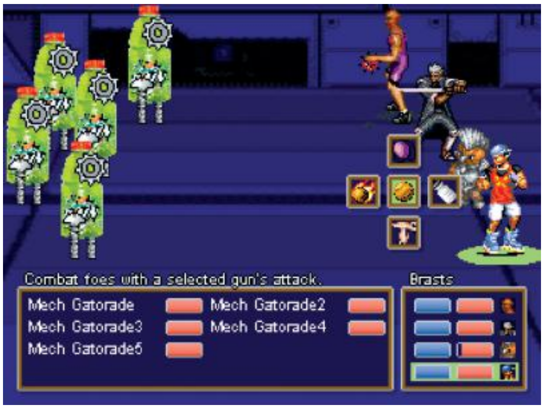
Graphically speaking, the comical design of the characters, enemies and locales is a treat. And the music delivers a serious Cyberpocalyptic atmosphere, only occasionally heading into silly territory.

Any gamer with a sense of humour could find nirvana here. *Barkley, Shut Up And Jam: Gaiden* is a treasure trove for RPG fans both old and new, serving as a reminder that some of the best things in life are free – just like this game. **GT**

A sequel to *Barkley* was funded by a Kickstarter campaign in December 2012, raising over $120,000. Sadly, it was cancelled in 2021.

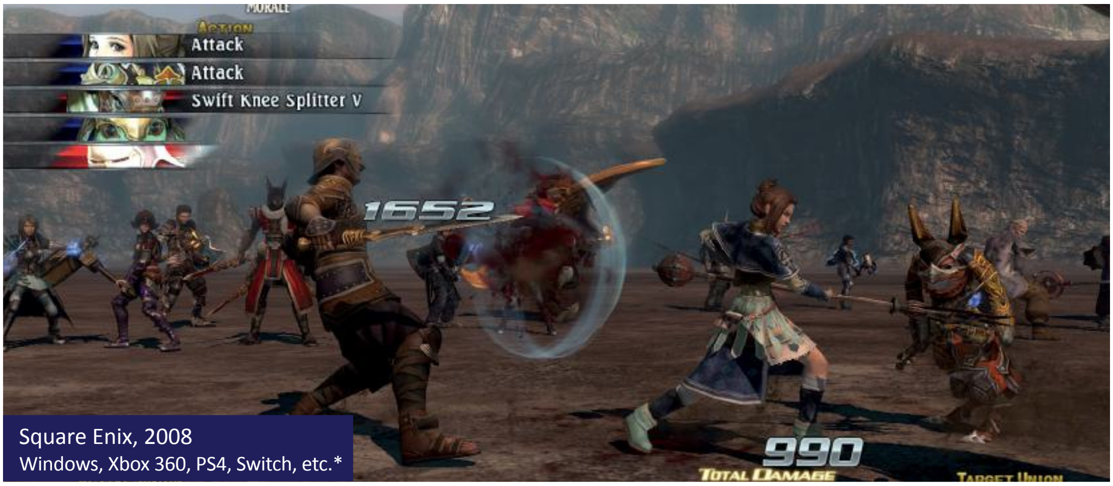

Jordan
That's a nice way to greet a friend, Charles. Heh, I was just in the neighborhood and thought I heard some... dribbling.

You'll come across all sorts of characters, from your old friend Michael Jordan to a cyberdwarf


Combat foes with a selected gun's attack.

Mix and match your abilities using the varied combat system: slam them from downtown, or have yourself some chicken fry – the choice is yours

The Last Remnant



Square Enix, 2008
Windows, Xbox 360, PS4, Switch, etc.*

The Last Remnant was a first for Square Enix, in many ways. It was their first game using the Unreal Engine 3, director Hiroshi Takai's first time at the helm, and their first big RPG designed from the ground up to appeal to Western audiences (which didn't work, as reception in the West was lukewarm). The result is a highly unusual JRPG with some key flaws that prevent it from reaching greatness.

The game is set in a fantasy world divided into city-states, all of which were built around Remnants, mysterious ancient artefacts that hold great power. Remnants have different shapes and sizes, going from small hand weapons to colossal towers, monsters and weapons. They can only be bound to one person at a time, usually the ruler of each city.

The story begins with Rush Sykes, the son of two Remnant scholars, having his sister kidnapped. In his quest to rescue her, Rush finds himself in the middle of political struggles, uncovering several mysteries and makings allies in the process. It's as bad as the typical JRPG story, but with a slightly better supporting cast.

But make no mistake – battles are the focus here. *The Last Remnant*'s combat system is the game's high point – as well as its most divisive aspect. Instead of individual characters, the player controls "unions". Each union can have up to five units, and the number of unions and units grows as the story progresses, up to five unions and 18 units per battle.

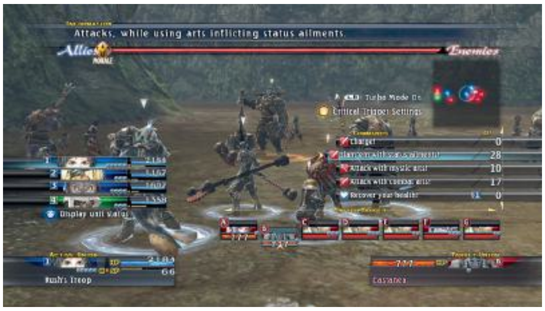
The HP, stats and skills of each union depend on its formation and the units comprising it. Instead of directly choosing attacks, you give general orders like "Use magic!", "Heal yourself!" or "Charge!" to each union, and its units then decide how to act.

There are many nuances like Battle Rank, morale, engagement and hidden stats, all of which are poorly explained. This makes combat artificially complicated at first, but it becomes rewarding once you master it, especially in the large-scale battles near the end.

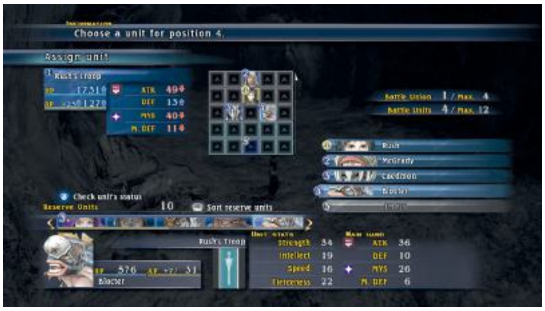
The game has many sub-quests, crafting, mining, random unique monsters, challenging optional battles, and sudden difficulty spikes that could lead players to grind, but actually punishes them for it. Enemies scale up after you pass a certain threshold and some can grow so powerful as to become near-impossible.

As such, *The Last Remnant* has a sweet spot – you should do all the side-quests and pursue its excellent optional battles, but grinding or min-maxing too much can spoil the fun. JRPG fans with the patience to learn its mechanics will have a good 60–100 hour experience with the game's unique combat system, great soundtrack and beautiful art. **FAX**

****The Last Remnant* came out on Xbox 360 in 2008, then as an enhanced PC port in 2009, adding a New Game+ mode, a Hard Mode and extra content. A remastered version was released in 2018 for PS4, Switch and mobile.**



Some battle commands are only available in certain contexts, while others depend on hidden stats



The character system is very unusual, as you can't directly control the class, skills or equipment of units; the focus is the formations

Valkyria Chronicles

Squad 7, combat formation!

SEGA, 2008
Windows, PS3 and PS4*

Set in a fictional version of Europe during a World War I-like conflict, *Valkyria Chronicles* saw the veteran SEGA team behind the *Sakura Wars* series deliver a breath of fresh air into tactical games.

The game's outstanding feature is its blend of tactical turn-based RPG with third-person combat. When a mission starts, you're sent into a tactical map and asked to dispatch up to ten units. Each turn, you're given a set number of Command Points, and by spending one you get to control a unit in third-person mode, walking around for a set period and performing one attack. You may use a unit repeatedly, but once your points are used up, the turn ends.

The game offers five classes – Scouts, Engineers, Shocktroopers, Lancers and Snipers – plus two types of tank. Knowing where and when to use them is key: a Lancer can destroy a tank with one well-aimed shot at its engine, but is useless against regular troops.

Each character also has their own personality traits: a "Loner" character, for example, gets a bonus when far from the rest of the squad. After each battle you'll earn money and XP based on your performance, which can be used to upgrade weapons, armour and tanks, as well as level up each of the classes.

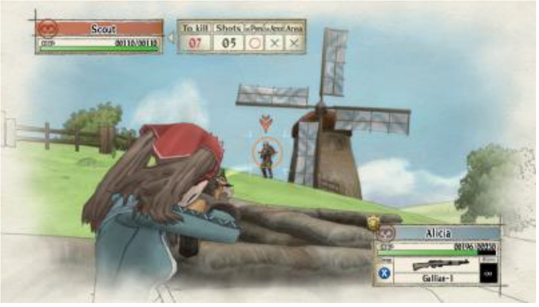
The main campaign offers 18 battles with a wide range of goals – you'll pursue an armoured car through narrow streets, avoid enemy search parties in a forest at night, defeat a massive tank, blow up a bridge, etc. Some missions can take over an hour, and allow many strategies, though the game pushes you to complete them as fast as possible to earn an S rank.

You'll eventually unlock extra side-missions, such as repeatable skirmishes (where you can train), special missions based around individual characters and the DLC missions, which are included in the PC port and allow you to play as other squads.

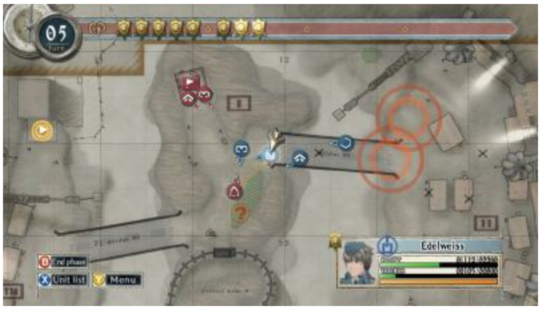
Between missions you're treated to story cutscenes, which are surprisingly good. Characters are quirky but down-to-earth, and the story is simple but focuses heavily on racism and the horrors of war, going as far as to include a concentration camp. The fantastic art style helps to set the bleak yet hopeful tone of the game, mixing expressive cel-shaded models with a charming watercolour style.

The sequels *Valkyria Chronicles II* (2010) and *III* (2011) are PSP exclusives, smaller in scope, but *Valkyria Chronicles 4* (2018) returned to PCs and consoles in force, offering more of what made the first *Valkyria Chronicles* one of the best tactical RPGs of the 2000s – a fresh take on the genre, with an involving story and gorgeous visuals. **FE**

******Valkyria Chronicles*** was first released for the PS3 in 2008, then ported to PCs in 2014. It also got a remaster for the PS4 in 2016.**

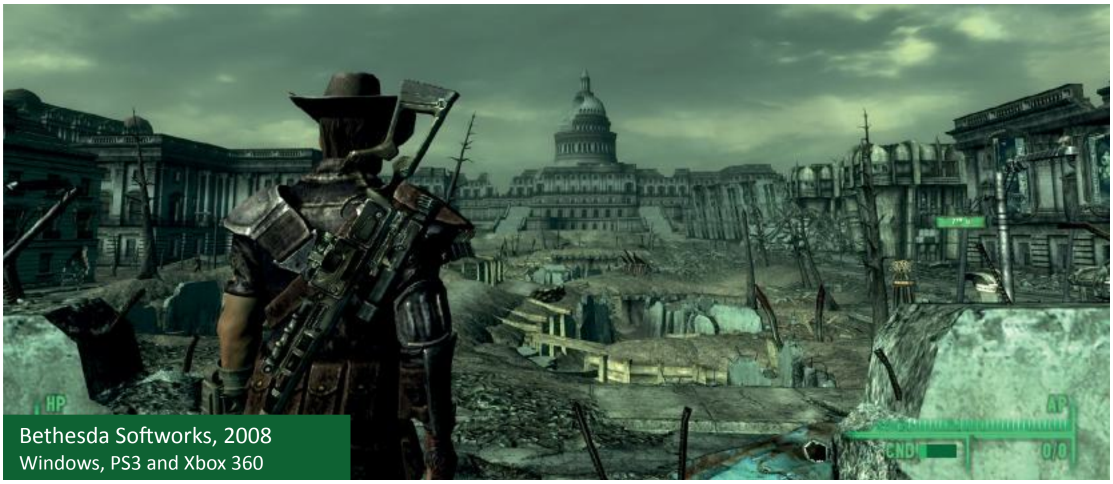


The game is turn-based, but you control your units in third-person mode, manually positioning them and aiming shots



Battlefields offer several obstacles and opportunities, such as high grass troops can hide in, minefields, sniper towers, elevators, barricades, etc.

Fallout 3



Bethesda Softworks, 2008
Windows, PS3 and Xbox 360

Bethesda hired various Hollywood actors for the game, with Liam Neeson voicing your father, Malcolm McDowell voicing Enclave's president and Ron Perlman reprising his role as narrator.

Upon the announcement of *Fallout 3*, someone new to the genre would be forgiven for thinking that Bethesda's previous RPGs, the *Elder Scrolls* series, were some of the worst ever made. I have rarely witnessed the sort of disappointment and vitriol that long-standing *Fallout* fans displayed.

Their worry was that *Fallout*, known for its branching paths, rich writing and complex character development, would be turned into a vapid, first-person, post-apocalyptic reskinning of *Oblivion*.

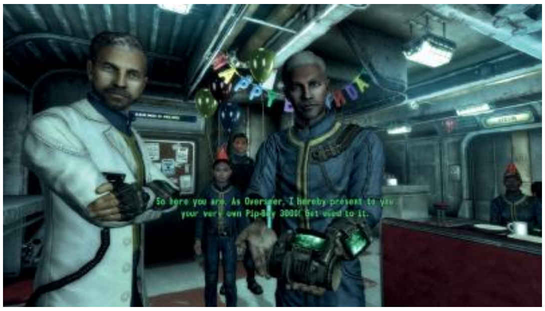
Bethesda did indeed scrap the famous Interplay-developed "Van Buren" *Fallout 3* prototype and decided to play to their strengths, with an enormous open world and a first-person, single-character perspective. *Fallout 3* turned out to be more than "*Oblivion* with guns", with an identity and atmosphere of its own – even if lacking the wit and dark sense of humour that characterised its predecessors.

From your introduction to the *Fallout* mythos via short slices of the character's life as a child living in a Vault, to dealing with the various factions and survivors that populate the DC wasteland, the player is immersed in a huge world, littered by odd groups trying to rediscover and reclaim their place in it.

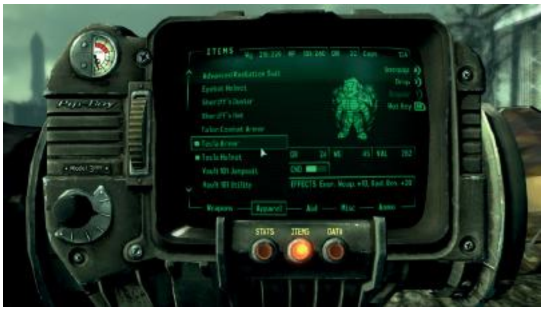
Each merchant caravan, each little settlement, each small hut in the middle of nowhere or hidden, highly secured Vault has its own story, its micro-narrative, either obvious or hidden, that helps the player assemble a larger picture of this post-apocalyptic world. It doesn't stand up to scrutiny, especially when compared to the previous games – things like food availability or the timeline don't make much sense when you think about it, so enjoying it does require a healthy dose of suspension of disbelief.

The combat feels like an odd mixture of genres, not quite skill-based first-person shooting and yet far from stats-based RPG territory. Crucial to making this approach work is the VATS system, which allows the player to pause time and target opponents' specific body parts, spending Action Points that vary depending on target, range and weapon.

This allows the player to fall into a pleasant rhythm of alternating between VATS tactical shooting and finding cover or doing real-time shooting while waiting for AP to recharge. Character development, however, is a curt affair. At each level-up, you can assign skill points that marginally increase your efficiency at a variety of tasks.

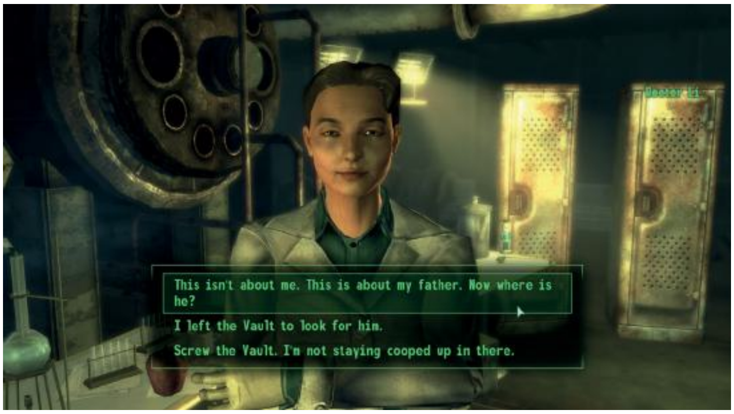

So here you are. As Overseer, I hereby present to you your very own Pip-Boy 3000! Get used to it.

You begin the game living with your father in Vault 101, from birth to the day he leaves the vault – and you follow



Fallout 3's character screen, quest log and inventory are all presented in your wrist-mounted Pip-Boy 3000

> "I think a lot of people assume that we're doing things to meet some sort of demographic; they're like, 'Oh, why is it first-person?' I love first-person. [...] When you step out of the vault, in first-person, and see the [HDR light effect on your] eyes come in ... Dude, that is a real moment."
>
> *– Todd Howard,*
> Fallout 3*'s director and*
> *executive producer*



This isn't about me. This is about my father. Now where is he?

I left the Vault to look for him.

Screw the Vault. I'm not staying cooped up in there.

The writing is one of *Fallout 3*'s weakest points, presenting few meaningful dialogue choices, dull companions and failing to capture the dark humour of the originals

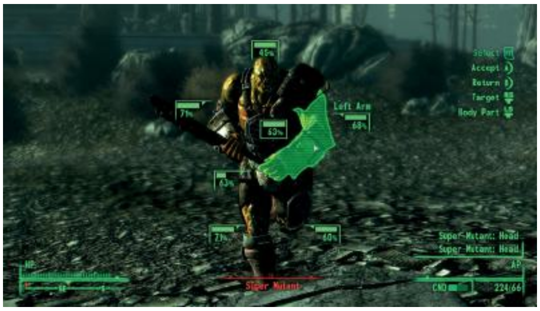
These range from hacking and lock-picking mini-games to better handling of each specific class of weapon. Each level-up, you can also choose a perk that, in most cases, ultimately boils down to making you hit others harder, or being harder to kill.

Meanwhile, exploring the game's vast world is hit-and-miss. Long treks into the unknown can sometimes uncover interesting side-quests, cool micro-narratives or even the treasured, permanently stat-increasing "bobblehead" collectible figures, but more often than not just reveal one more derelict office building, a victim of copy/paste area design.

And while you can participate in acts that range from blowing up an entire town to sharing water with a dying man, choices ultimately matter little besides nudging your karma meter one way or another. They are accounted for, but don't affect you.

Luckily, the game came with powerful modding tools, allowing the community to improve on most of these negatives through many different mods, the most comprehensive being the *Fallout 3 Wanderer's Edition* mod, an overhaul of nearly every mechanic. To many, this is the "right" way to play the game.

Still, *Fallout 3* is an interesting journey, with fun set pieces leading up to a truly epic final showdown – which, once again, doesn't stand up to scrutiny.



VATS allows you to pause and spend Action Points to fire aimed shots, which are then shown in slow motion

But storytelling was never a landmark of any Bethesda game, and *Fallout 3* is no exception. Instead, it grips you with its vast open world, as you cruise the wasteland listening to vintage records on the radio, wondering what lies just beyond the next hill.

The first few hours remain the most engaging: fresh to this new world, players must scramble to find resources amidst the ruins, always fearing the raiders or bandits that lurk around every corner.

After release, *Fallout 3* got five DLCs, which sent the player away to different regions, but most were limited in scope. The two standouts, however, were *Point Lookout,* a tour through an exceptionally atmospheric bayou region, and *Broken Steel,* an additional chapter to the main storyline that enables the player to continue playing past the game's ending.

"War, war never changes," is the game's opening line. But *Fallout*, on the other hand, changed a lot. And while it introduced a whole new generation of fans to the series, it also left many of the old fans out in the cold wasteland. **LM**

Mods:

Unofficial Fallout 3 Patch: Fixes hundreds of bugs.

Fallout 3 Wanderer's Edition: A huge overhaul mod that improves the game in every way, making combat better, the RPG elements more relevant and adding new weapons, items and features. A must-have!

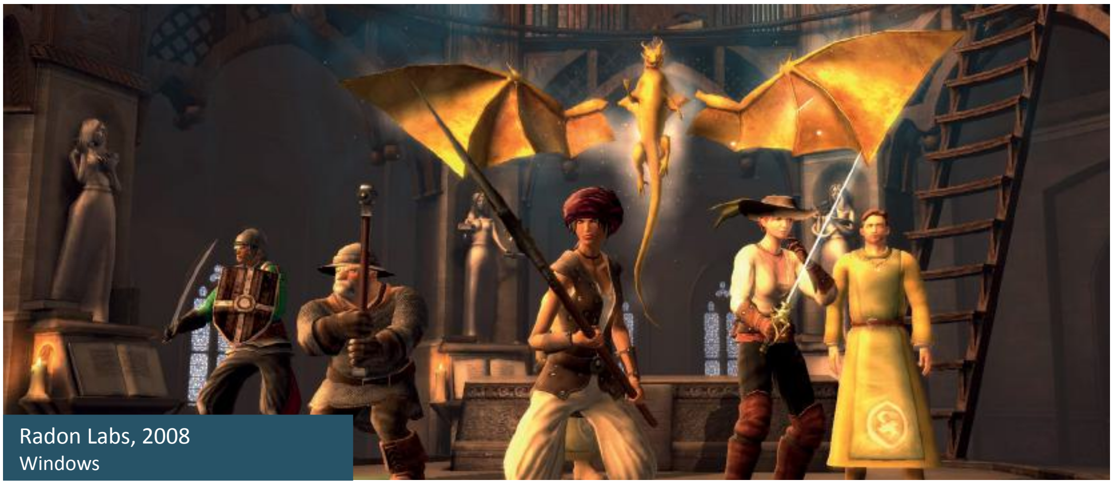
Fellout: Overhauls the game's weather and lighting, replacing the green tint with a more natural look.

Fallout Overhaul Kit (FOOK): A big mod pack that adds hundreds of weapons, armour and new textures, together with some gameplay balance changes.

Flora Overhaul: Replaces the game's environment.

Alton, IL: A fan-made expansion, adds an entirely new area and a long and elaborate quest to the game.

Drakensang: The Dark Eye



Radon Labs, 2008
Windows

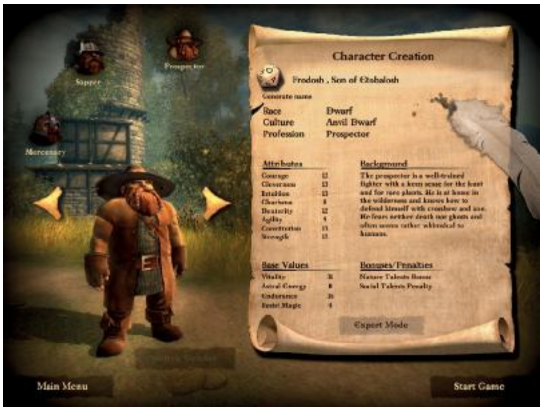
A series of online Choose-Your-Own-Adventure games based on *The Dark Eye* were released alongside *Drakensang.* You can play them at www.tde-games.com.

Drakensang adapts *The Dark Eye,* the popular German pen-and-paper RPG, for computers, for the first time since *Realms of Arkania: Shadows over Riva*, way back in 1996.

A lot has changed since then. *Drakensang* uses the updated 4th edition rules and, instead of a blobber with turn-based combat like *RoA*, plays as what its developers described as "*Baldur's Gate* in 3D" – an epic real-time-with-pause RPG in which you create a character and gather companions to save the world.

This instantly brings *Dragon Age: Origins* (2009) to mind, but *Drakensang* actually predates it. It also goes for a very different tone, with a colourful, slightly cartoony art style and a whimsical world, populated by burlesque characters. It feels like a game born out of a fun pen-and-paper RPG session between friends.

Its main feature, *The Dark Eye* ruleset, is both a blessing and a curse. It's a complex, classless system that offers a lot of freedom in character building. Experience points are used to directly upgrade your characters – improving attributes, spells and talents, or being spent on trainers to teach new ones.



You can start by choosing from 20 archetypes, such as Human Battlemage and Dwarf Prospector, or toggle into Expert Mode and customise your character using *The Dark Eye* ruleset

Such freedom demands understanding to be fully enjoyed. The developers added tooltips and a nice manual, but it's a much more complicated system than *Dungeons & Dragons*. Some nuances, such as how parrying works, can be hard for newcomers to grasp.

A bigger frustration comes from how poorly the game employs all these talents and nuances; for example, you'll have very few chances to use the five Social talents, such as Fast Talk and Seduce. The majority of dialogues won't even provide a single role-playing option – you'll just click on the only available option and continue reading. Or just skip, since the NPCs have unique looks but dull, poorly-translated lines.

In fact, *Drakensang* as a whole suffers from a poor overall quality of content. Everything is linear and railroaded – once you explore an area and finish the main quest there, you're sent to the next area, unable to ever return to the previous one. Some quests have creative premises, but too often they force you to walk back and forth over a large area, usually fighting the same respawning enemies over and over.

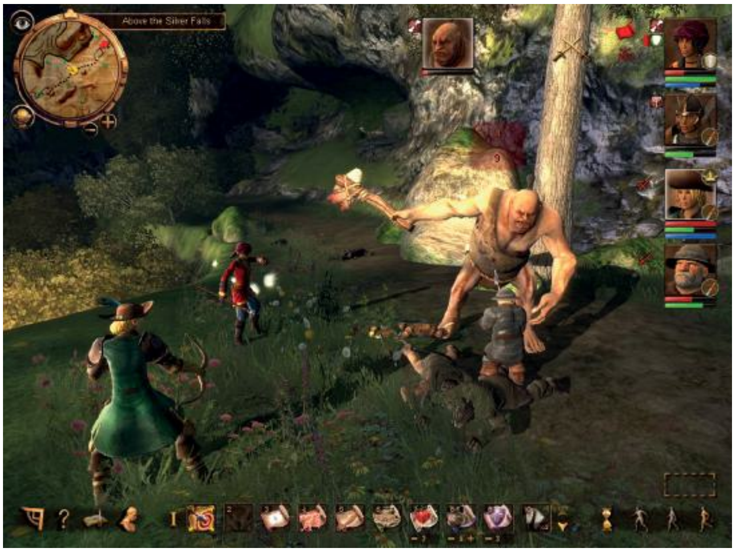
The combat is also a mixed bag. It has great animations and flows well, but lacks depth. During most of the game, characters will only have one or two combat skills, limiting your options. Worse, there's no collision detection – enemies can walk right through your heroes, making positioning useless.

This is tolerable during most fights, but hurts during the challenging boss battles – especially when they overwhelm you with large numbers of enemies, exposing the lack of tactical options available.

Overall, *Drakensang* has all the building blocks required for a great RPG, but the content lacks in quality and fails to take advantage of its strengths. Playing it leaves you disappointed. It looks great and has a rich system; it should be fun! But it isn't.

"What's really important to us is creating a huge pool of clothing, weapons and armour for the player to choose from, so we have something which I jokingly call '*Barbie* dolls for men', an opportunity for adults to play dress-up, so to say. The variety of items, a flexible equipment system and upgrading your character are a lot of fun and very important elements in *Drakensang*."

– Bernd Beyreuther,
Drakensang*'s project director*



Combat is real-time-with-pause, with up to four party members; it's very similar to that in many BioWare titles, but issues such as limited abilities and a wonky movement system stop it from being great

Luckily, Radon Labs later released *Drakensang: The River of Time* (2010), a prequel which took players' feedback to heart and improved upon every aspect of the game. Exploration became non-linear and talents more useful; fast-travel points were added; filler battles were replaced by engaging set pieces. It's the same system, but with much better content.

Still, the most interesting change is the scope, as *The River of Time* goes for a shorter and more intimate story. Instead of being the Chosen One, here you join a trio of charismatic adventurers – Ardo, the Warrior; Cano, the Thief; and Forgrimm, the Dwarf – and play as their partner in a smaller, 30-hour adventure.

You'll still be able to control them most of the time, but in some moments they'll act by themselves. For example, when trying to invade a fortress, Cano will try sneaking while Forgrimm will brute-force his way in. You'll decide who to help – playing either a stealth section or a combat gauntlet.

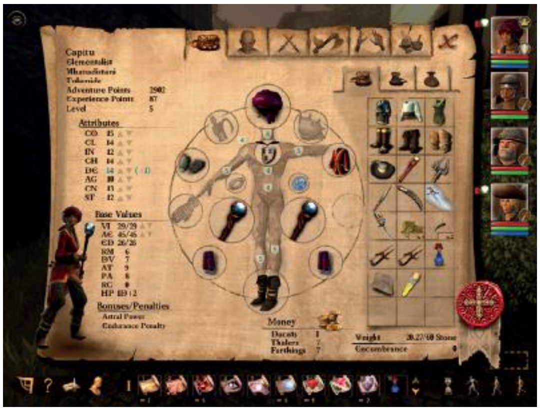
The game delivers these moments in a well-paced and humorous tone that fits perfectly with the colourful art style. In a sense, *The River of Time* is perhaps the closest we ever got to a *Princess Bride* CRPG.

Sadly, Radon Labs had several issues publishing the game outside Germany. Its English version arrived almost a year later, as a $20 budget title that had no marketing or press coverage. Radon Labs still put out the *Phileasson's Secret* expansion, but then went bankrupt.

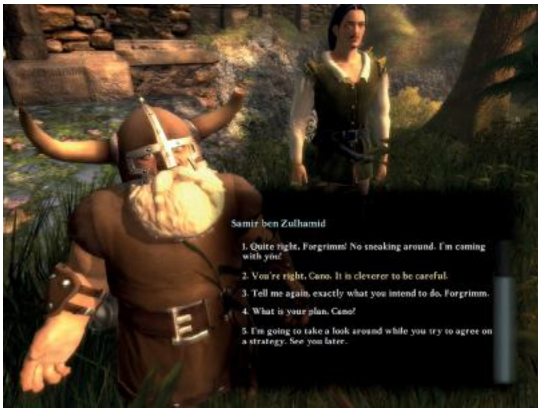
The company was acquired by Bigpoint Games, a German publisher specialising in browser games. In 2011, they released *Drakensang Online* – a free-to-play *Diablo*-like browser MMORPG, no longer connected to previous games or the *Dark Eye* ruleset.

Drakensang: The Dark Eye might have been underwhelming, but *The River of Time* remains a great RPG. Few people got the chance to play it, but if you're reading this and enjoy games like *Dragon Age*, be sure to embark on this joyful, full-hearted adventure. **FE**

We suggest using *Ergo's Fixpack* when playing *Drakensang,* and *Ergo's AddonPack* when playing *River of Time.* Both mods feature several bug fixes, balance improvements and other useful tweaks, such as faster movement.



The Dark Eye ruleset gives players a lot of options, but they can be hard to understand and are often underused

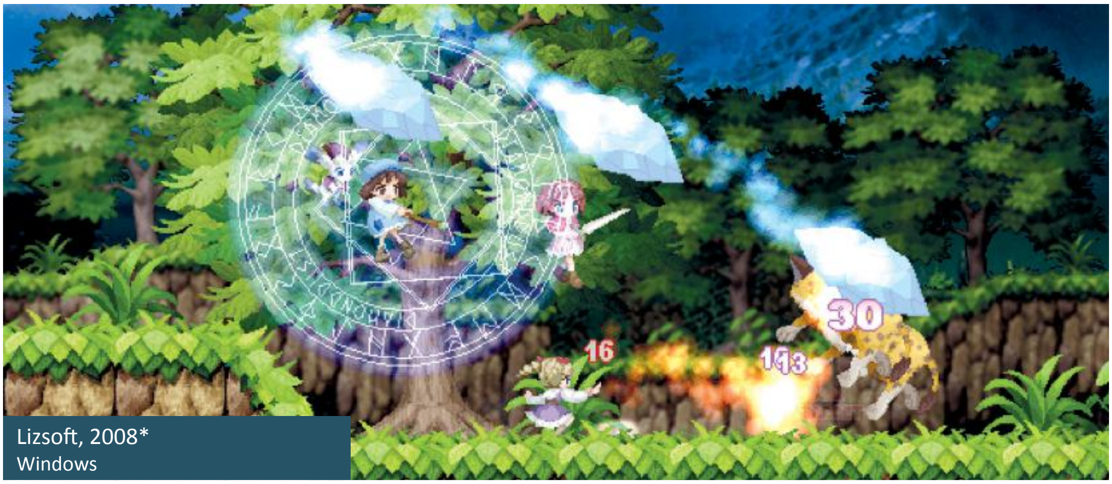


Samir ben Zulhamid

1. Quite right, Forgrimm! No sneaking around. I'm coming with you!
2. You're right, Cano. It is cleverer to be careful.
3. Tell me again, exactly what you intend to do, Forgrimm.
4. What is your plan, Cano?
5. I'm going to take a look around while you try to agree on a strategy. See you later.

The River of Time features more choices that affect dialogue and gameplay, such as helping Forgrimm or Cano

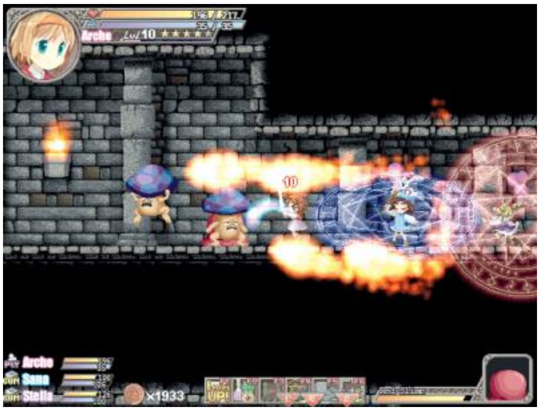
Fortune Summoners: Secret of the Elemental Stone


Lizsoft, 2008*
Windows

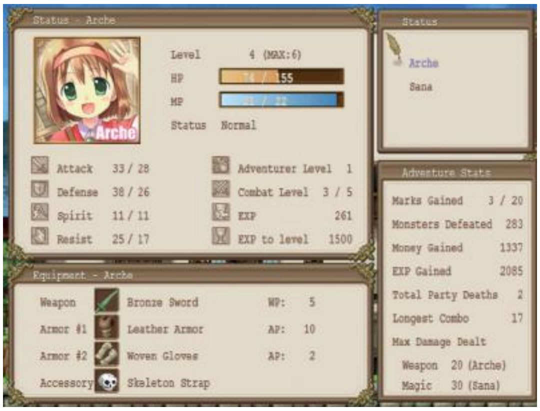
FS* was first released in 2008, then localised into English in 2012 by Carpe Fulgure. A deluxe version was released in 2009 in Japan, with extra content and voice acting, but it remains Japan-only.

Fortune Summoners is a hardcore side-scroller ARPG in the vein of "Metroidvania" games, featuring three classes (combat roles) and a strong emphasis on character stats and skills.

The main character, Arche, is a physical fighter who is controlled similarly to one in a fighting game, while her friends are magic-users – Sana's water magic is slow but diverse, while Stella is an aggressive fire spellcaster, capable of freely moving around.



You can switch control between the three main characters on the fly, as well as customising how they behave when under AI control


Status - Arche

Arche

Level 4 (MAX:6)
HP 74 / 155
MP
Status Normal

Attack 33 / 28
Defense 38 / 26
Spirit 11 / 11
Resist 25 / 17

Adventurer Level 1
Combat Level 3 / 5
EXP 261
EXP to level 1500

Equipment - Arche

Weapon Bronze Sword WP: 5
Armor #1 Leather Armor AP: 10
Armor #2 Woven Gloves AP: 2
Accessory Skeleton Strap

Status

Arche
Sana

Adventure Stats

Marks Gained 3 / 20
Monsters Defeated 283
Money Gained 1337
EXP Gained 2085
Total Party Deaths 2
Longest Combo 17
Max Damage Dealt
Weapon 20 (Arche)
Magic 30 (Sana)

Characters have four base attributes, and also learn many spells and abilities; using them correctly without sticking to just one or two is crucial

Generally, combat is what the game does best. Enemies react to your moves, acting ahead if your actions get too simplistic, dodging your attacks, taking advantage of the pauses in your movement, and inflicting status ailments. They also block, flank, stun-lock you, fly, jump, leap, attack from range, cast powerful spells, heal themselves, float out of your attack or spell range and move faster than you do.

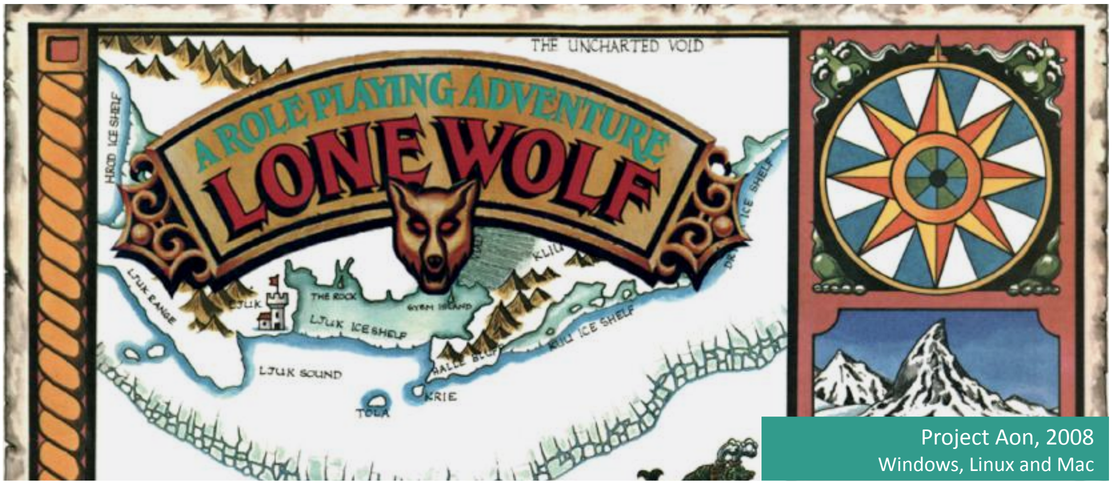
Much of the game's difficulty comes from managing your timing and momentum (which may prove frustrating to some). The companion AI is competent enough that the player might find themselves worse at controlling the girls (in particular Arche) than it is, but it's also highly customisable.

Fortune Summoners never holds your hand. Dungeons get labyrinthine and span many screens, featuring puzzles that involve jumping, switch-pulling, crate-pushing and discovering hidden passages. Unfortunately, exploration can get fetch quest-y and linear, with a back-and-forth design that often expects you to find one particular NPC amidst a hundred others to advance the plot.

Starting off with Arche, the transfer student on the way to her new school, the game's story and dialogue are nothing if not cliché-laden – luckily treated playfully, not seriously. The pervading spirit of light-heartedness and camaraderie, perfectly captured by Carpe Fulgur's translation, eases you into the whole nonsense pretty well, too.

Fortune Summoners takes pride in its old-school design, with good reason and to good effect. The combat is engaging and challenging, the writing is upbeat and charming, and the dungeon-crawling, while at times artificially prolonged by backtracking, is enjoyable, with many secrets to find. As a result, it remains one of my favourites. **CB**

Seventh Sense



Project Aon, 2008
Windows, Linux and Mac

In July of 1984, the first instalment of the *Lone Wolf* gamebook series, *Flight from the Dark*, was published, spawning a franchise that would sell over ten million books to date.

The setup is classic: you are Lone Wolf, the only surviving Kai Lord – an order of holy warriors blessed with psychic and physical powers that opposes the Darklords. It's a simple tale of good guys versus bad guys, but the implementation is masterful.

Created by young musician Joe Dever, together with his artist friend, Gary Chalk, the series would stamp upon young minds a narrative, a look and an identity that would shape their idea of fantasy for years to come. Sadly, by the late '90s, the gamebook market had withered, prematurely ending the series.

In recent years, however, there has been renewed interest in the series thanks to Project Aon, a fan-created site that re-released the books in HTML, with permission from Joe Dever, who approved the free dissemination of his work online as a gift to the fans.

Seventh Sense is a free, fan-made playing aid for the Project Aon versions of the *Lone Wolf* gamebooks. It automates and aids the playthrough, tracking all stats, rolls, skills, items and page-jumping, while also allowing players to greatly customise the book's rules and art style, and even to seek special challenges.

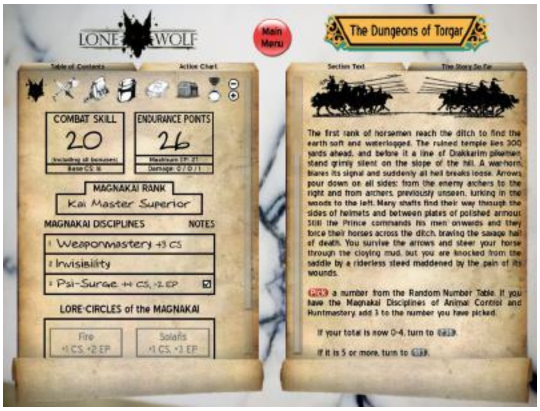
The books are intended to be played in order, as one huge adventure. In the first one you create your character, rolling stats, choosing skills (Camouflage, Hunting, Weaponskill, Healing, Mind Blast, etc.) and your initial equipment. These choices will all greatly impact the options available during your quest.

Each subsequent book allows you to keep your current equipment and choose one extra skill, taking Lone Wolf all the way from an apprentice to a Grand Master with mythical weapons and powerful spells.

The series has 29 books, and at the time of writing *Seventh Sense* supports up to book 17, *The Deathlords of Ixia*, and it's regularly updated with more content.

To return to *Lone Wolf* after a few decades away is a pleasurable experience. The adventures of the last of the Kai Lords are short, sharp shocks: full of daring escapes, sudden deaths, exotic locales, crazy plots and fantastical elements that enchant young minds and cloud old ones with a perfect miasma of nostalgia. **NT**

In 1998, Joe Dever published the 28th *Lone Wolf* book. After an 18-year hiatus, he returned in 2016 with a self-published 29th book.



COMBAT SKILL
20
(including all bonuses)

ENDURANCE POINTS
26

MAGNAKAI RANK
Kai Master Superior

MAGNAKAI DISCIPLINES NOTES
1 Weaponmastery +3 CS
2 Invisibility
3 Psi-Surge +4 CS, -2 EP ☑

LORE-CIRCLES of the MAGNAKAI
Fire +1 CS, +2 EP
Solaris +1 CS, +3 EP

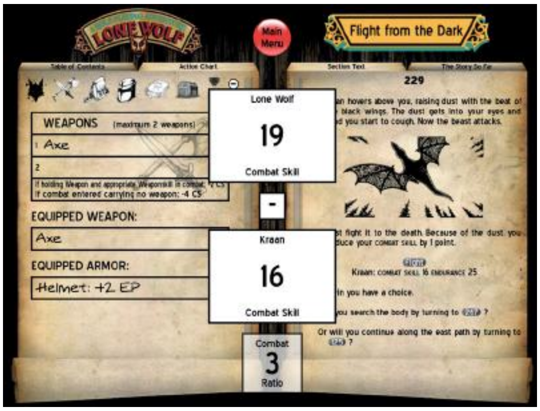
The first rank of horsemen reach the ditch to find the earth soft and waterlogged. The ruined temple lies 300 yards ahead, and before it a line of Drakkarim pikemen stand grimly silent on the slope of the hill. A war-horn blares its signal and suddenly all hell breaks loose. Arrows pour down on all sides: from the enemy archers to the right and from archers, previously unseen, lurking in the woods to the left. Many shafts find their way through the sides of helmets and between plates of polished armour. Still the Prince commands his men onwards and they force their horses across the ditch, braving the savage hail of death. You survive the arrows and steer your horse through the cloying mud, but you are knocked from the saddle by a riderless steed maddened by the pain of its wounds.

Pick a number from the Random Number Table. If you have the Magnakai Disciplines of Animal Control and Huntmastery, add 3 to the number you have picked.

If your total is now 0–4, turn to [illegible].

If it is 5 or more, turn to [illegible].

Seventh Sense calculates and tracks all your rolls, skills, items and choices; this is especially useful as you carry your hero from one book to another



WEAPONS (maximum 2 weapons)
1 Axe
2
If holding Weapon and appropriate Weaponskill in combat: +2 CS
If combat entered carrying no weapon: -4 CS

EQUIPPED WEAPON:
Axe

EQUIPPED ARMOR:
Helmet: +2 EP

Lone Wolf
19
Combat Skill

-

Kraan
16
Combat Skill

Combat
3
Ratio

229

…an hovers above you, raising dust with the beat of… black wings. The dust gets into your eyes and…d you start to cough. Now the beast attacks.

…st fight it to the death. Because of the dust you…duce your COMBAT SKILL by 1 point.

Kraan: COMBAT SKILL 16 ENDURANCE 25

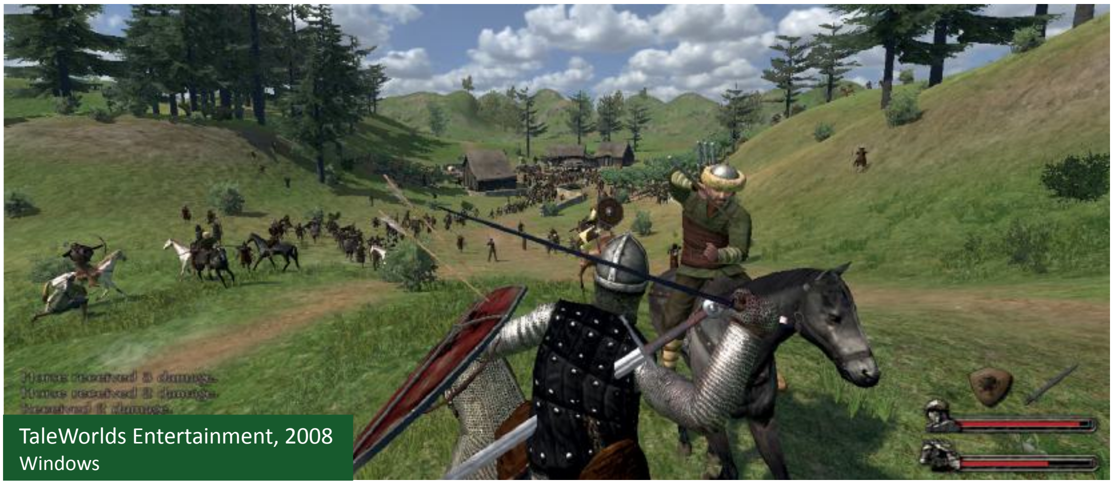
…in you have a choice.

…ou search the body by turning to [illegible] ?

Or will you continue along the east path by turning to [illegible] ?

Combat is solved by taking your Combat Skill, subtracting the enemy's Combat Skill and rolling a die, after which a chart indicates the battle's result

Mount & Blade


TaleWorlds Entertainment, 2008
Windows

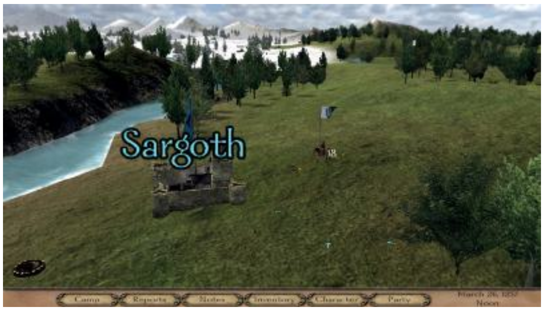
TaleWorlds is an independent games studio based in Turkey. In 2005 they were founded and released an alpha of *Mount & Blade.* From that alpha they gathered a fan base, funding for the full game and a publishing deal with Paradox.

If you take visceral hack-and-slash combat akin to that found in *Chivalry: Medieval Warfare*, add in a smaller scale, more intimate taste of battle management à la *Medieval: Total War*, and wrap it all in the trappings of a medieval sandbox world with RPG elements, your end result is the multifaceted and engaging game named *Mount & Blade*.

You start by creating your character, answering questions about their background and ambitions, which will affect your stats, items and social standing. Then the game begins, and you're in Calradia, a large medieval world, free to do whatever you wish – hunt bandits, recruit villagers for your army, fight nobles in tournaments, offer your services to a king, etc.

But truly, the soul of *Mount & Blade* is its battles. Whether you are a general charging the enemy's army from a snow-covered hill or just a soldier taking part in a castle siege, the game just comes to life: the landscapes, character, weapon and armour models, sound of hooves, clash of blades and cries of battle all work together to immerse you in that moment.

Combat is deceptively simple: by pressing the left button and moving your mouse you attack from left, right, overhead or thrust. Doing the same with the other button leads to a block, but there are parries, shields, weapon types, momentum and other nuances.



While travelling in the world map, you'll often come across nobles, villagers, caravans, bandits and armies, each with their own objectives and behaviours

You may also issue instructions for your army – if you manage to keep a sharp mind as battle erupts around you. Clashing with targets of opportunity and making snap decisions as the unpredictableness of battle unfolds to achieve victory is deeply satisfying.

While roaming the lands of Calradia, either as an avatar on the game map or while exploring one of the towns or castles that dot its surface, you are able to stop, rest your troops, and plan your next move amongst all the chaos of a land contested by multiple factions. This is when the sense of all of your battles being small cogs in a larger machine sets in – as you interact with NPCs either through dialogue or at the tip of a sword, other NPC units are likewise pursuing their own objectives all around you.

Faction relations and interactions are ever-shifting, and the armies are constantly on the move. Fortunately, significant events you don't encounter yourself while roaming the land are flashed to you in text and logged into the game's bank of reference material, providing general glimpses of the state of the land when needed.

The lands of Caraldia are alive with more than just the faction forces: army deserters, manhunters tracking them down, sea raiders, villagers, trade caravans and more all move about and interact, making the otherwise sparse land come alive with the simulated life of the population.

Conflicts, either small skirmishes or all-out battles with hundreds of troops, are always occurring throughout the land, and your role in it all is up to you. At night, sight lines are reduced, and it may come as a shock to find just how close an enemy force is when dawn strikes. Fortunately, everything on the land freezes when your force is stopped, giving you time to plan your next move.

Mods for Mount & Blade

Battle Size Changer: Allows you to increase the maximum number of soldiers in battle at once, from the default 100 to a max of 1,000.

The Last Days of the Third Age: Lets the player fight on either side of the War of the Ring, as one of Tolkien's various fantasy races.

Star Wars Conquest: A huge mod set in the *Star Wars* universe that allows you to explore, battle heroes and conquer the galaxy.

Sword of Damocles: Adds a complex kingdom management system, over 100+ troop types and much more.

Mods for Mount & Blade: Warband

Floris Mod Pack: A compilation of great mods created by fans. Highly recommended.

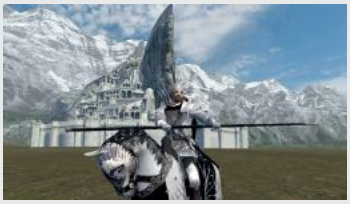
Anno Domini 1257: Set during the Crusades and Mongol Invasions.

Brytenwalda: A complex mod set in Britain after the fall of Rome.

Prophesy of Pendor: A popular but challenging mod, with tough enemies and deadly combat.

A Clash of Kings: Set in the world of G.R.R. Martin's *Game of Thrones*.

Warsword Conquest: An amazing mod based on *Warhammer Fantasy*.



The Last Days of the Third Age mod allows you to defend Minas Tirith

Conquer the galaxy as a Sith lord in the *Star Wars Conquest* mod

As it's a sandbox game, there is no overarching narrative guiding progression in *M&B*, so "winning" falls to a player's own particular interests. This could mean aiding your faction in achieving dominance, but could also involve more character-specific goals.

Perhaps you wish to aid a pretender to wrest the throne from her rival and in turn be granted a lordship? Both your Renown (earned in battle) and your Relationship rating with lords and townspeople will determine if they even acknowledge you, and are impacted by quests and the decisions you make.

If combat is your main goal, the XP gained from kills and completing missions increases your stats, which in turn opens the door to higher skill levels. Skills are all passive, and range from dealing more damage with certain weapons to riding better horses, tracking other groups, capturing prisoners, persuading nobles and better troop training.

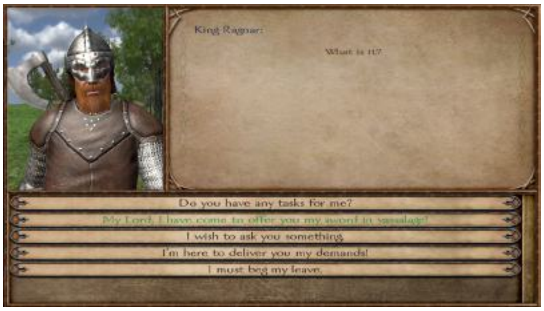
Yes, your troops will also level up, following one of several upgrade trees. Those Swadian farmers you recruited might become powerful knights, while the Khergit recruits can become agile horse archers.

The effort and care for detail put in by TaleWorlds to create a faithful medieval experience rather than a fantastic one is an endearing facet of *Mount & Blade*: weapons and armour are more rugged than gaudy; castles, towns and villages are made of hewn wood or stone; and the people of Calradia look and act the part: the poor are unwashed and weary, while the nobility are rather cleaner and focused on self-interest.

In 2010, a stand-alone expansion called *Mount & Blade: Warband* was released, adding a new faction, the ability to form your kingdom and multiplayer. Then came historical packs: *With Fire & Sword* (2011), *Napoleonic Wars* (2012) and *Viking Conquest* (2014), adding guns, cannons, ambushes and much more. Still, *Warband* remains the most popular version, thanks to its amazing variety of excellent mods.

Ultimately, the core of *Mount & Blade* is reflected in its name, giving a harrowing and entertaining taste of being a medieval battle commander. But it does so within a subtly immersive world of conflict and choice shaped by your victories or defeats, by mount and by blade. **BW**

The *With Fire & Sword* expansion is set in 1600s Poland and it's based on a famous novel of the same name, written by Nobel-winning author Henryk Sienkiewicz.



King Ragnar:

What is it?

Do you have any tasks for me?

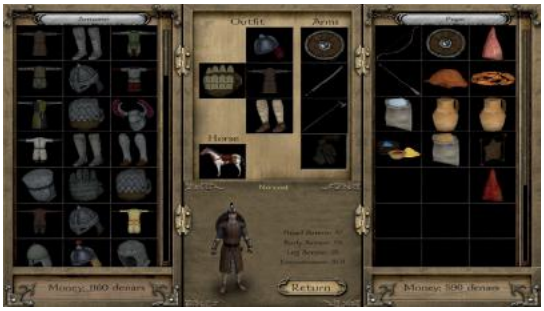
My Lord, I have come to offer you my sword in vassalage!

I wish to ask you something.

I'm here to deliver you my demands!

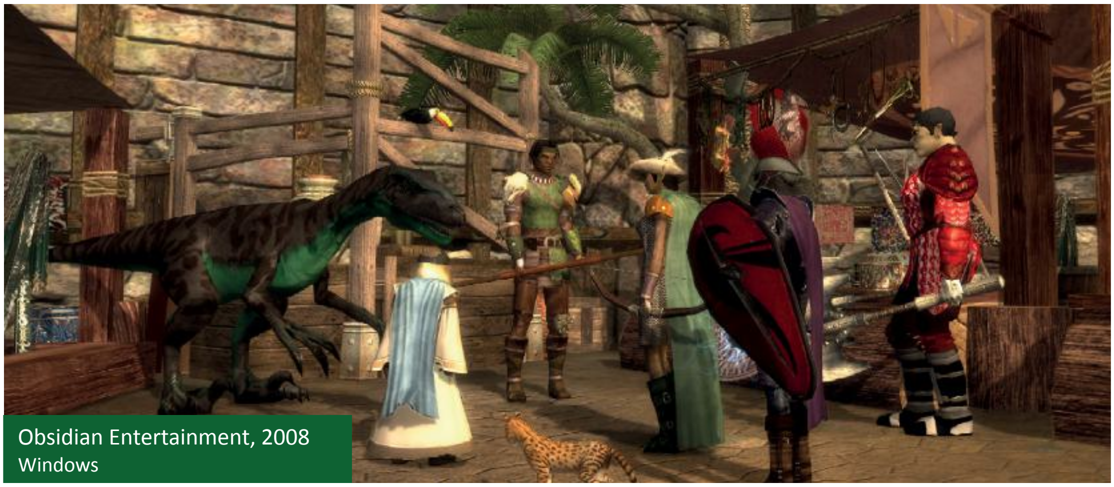
I must beg my leave.

Characters don't have much of a personality, but dialogues offer many options, from serving kings to marrying nobles



You can buy weapons, armour, horses and food for the troops or even live as a trader, making profit on trade goods

Neverwinter Nights 2:
Storm of Zehir

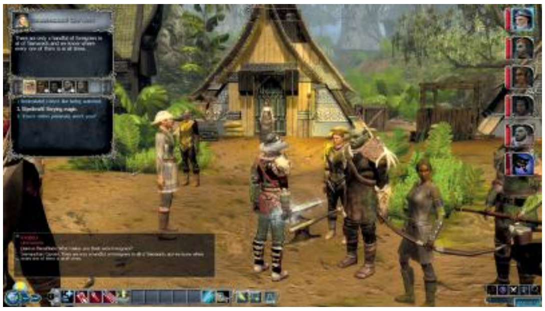


Obsidian Entertainment, 2008
Windows

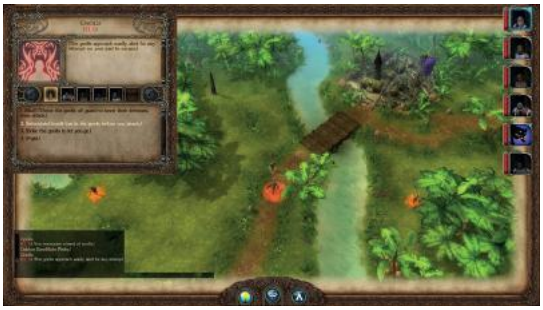
Whereas *NWN 2's* first expansion, *Mask of the Betrayer*, wriggled free of the main campaign's tiresome Sword Coast heroics to deliver a charmingly dark and offbeat fairy-tale narrative, Obsidian Entertainment's second add-on offered the chance for its designers to get genuinely creative with the series' gameplay.

Storm of Zehir wouldn't have the budget of either of its predecessors, or the development time, or the manpower. What it did have was an impressive collection of art assets (including almost 120 unique creatures), 24 sub-races, 15 base classes, 24 prestige classes and 1,859 feats – plus a dozen-odd background traits for anyone who wasn't satisfied with those character-building possibilities.

The tight budget on *Storm of Zehir* led to some of the acting work being carried out in-house, with the developers themselves voicing some of the characters.



Zehir allows the entire party to engage in conversations, with characters' skills, races, classes and alignments allowing for varied replies



On the world map, characters pass skill checks to run faster through rough terrain, spot various hidden locations and avoid being ambushed by wandering foes

With this hoard of role-playing resources in hand, lead designer Tony Evans and his team decided that *Zehir* would be a throwback CRPG; a story-light adventure with full party creation, a variety of monsters, and heavy emphasis on skill checks. It would take the player through the mysterious jungles of Chult, founding a trade empire while attempting to thwart a Yuan-Ti conspiracy.

It was a fantastic idea – and, in its efforts to re-establish the delights of unfashionably outdated RPG tropes, highly prescient. Sadly, the project's ambitions come up short against a pretty unassailable obstacle – the game itself. Simply put, *NWN2* is the wrong vehicle for this kind of RPG. Its long loading times and module-based gameplay become truly agonizing when applied to a constant series of random encounters and tiny settlements, while the infamously bad AI continues to wreck all hope of creating legitimately tactical combat.

Other ideas simply feel half-baked; the merchant empire-building amounts to little more than trotting across the map collecting invisible lumber and dropping it off at various towns. The main plot itself is so lightly handled as to barely register.

There are genuine consolations, however. The game's dungeons, while often frustratingly small, make full and inventive use of its bestiary. The jungles of Chult (and their dinosaurs!) are a fresh and welcome locale. And the grandest innovations – the party-based conversation system and the world map – deserve to have real influence on RPG design long after memories of this expansion have faded.

Zehir, in short, is a real curiosity – albeit one more likely to appeal to modders, designers and Obsidian completionists than anyone looking for a solid, entertaining, dungeon-crawling good time. **GT**

Divinity II: Ego Draconis

Larian Studios, 2009
Windows and Xbox 360

This is a game in which you can (at will) turn into a dragon, attack a flying fortress and the army of demons protecting it, land in the courtyard, kill the guards with a mix of fierce sword fighting and spell-casting, subdue the fortress' commander and then read his mind to find out his deepest secrets. All this 100% gameplay, no cutscenes involved. It has to be one of the best RPGs ever made, right?

Unfortunately, no. Larian's ambitious vision for *Divinity II* included a multiplayer campaign and even RTS elements. However, development issues, lack of funding and the hardware limitations of the Xbox 360 forced them to make some deep cuts in their project. While the end result is still an entertaining third-person action RPG, it's also a very uneven one.

Starting as an apprentice Dragon Slayer, you are sent on your first hunting expedition. Soon the tables turn, as you suddenly find yourself bound to a dragon, able to shape-shift into a mighty flying beast, but on the run from your previous companions.

Larian always set themselves apart by their clever writing, and *Divinity II* is no exception. Some of the dialogues are exceptional, the quests are highly creative and the game overflows with interesting ideas, such as the aforementioned mind-reading skill, the mighty dragon form, an undead "pet" you can customise by collecting body parts and even a personal battle tower, complete with servants you must recruit.

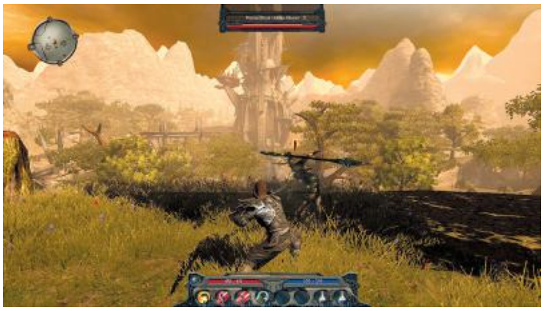
The problem is that the game often doesn't play to its strengths, tiring players with dungeons full of mindless enemies or repetitive battles against the flying fortress, when the real treat lies in its dialogues and quests. The combat isn't bad per se, featuring a nice range of spells and abilities, but it's poorly balanced. Worse, it's often clear that you're fighting enemies just to artificially extend the game's length.

The original release was plagued by bugs, but the 2011 *Dragon Knight Saga* re-release fixed most issues, enhanced the graphics, redesigned some areas and added the *Flames of Vengeance* expansion pack, with about 20 hours of new content.

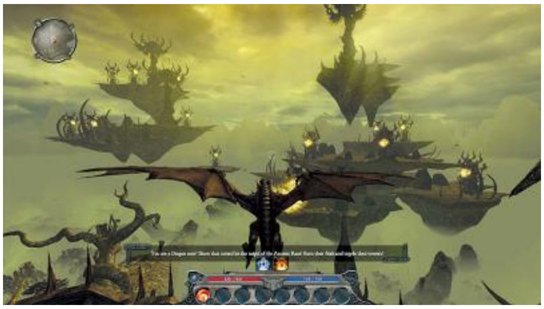
In 2012, Larian would release the *Developer's Cut* version, adding design documents, concept art, a fascinating documentary about the development of the game and the various obstacles they faced, plus an optional "cheat mode".

Read that as a developer's confession that the game works better as a crazy, light-hearted experience, enjoying quests and skipping combat. *Divinity II* could have been much more, but its humour and clever writing still guarantee a good time. **FE**

Larian would return for more dragon battles in *Divinity: Dragon Commander* (2013), an exotic mix of RTS battles, strategy maps, dragon combat and politics simulation.



Combat is simple and cool-down-based, but gets the job done; the real problem is that there's just too much of it



While impressive, transforming into a dragon can get tiresome, as you're mostly limited to repetitive battles against a flying fortress

Dragon Age: Origins

BioWare, 2009
Windows, Mac, PS3 and Xbox 360

DA:O **had a tie-in Flash game called** ***Dragon Age Journeys.*** **It was a short tactical RPG set in the Deep Roads; finishing it unlocked new items on** ***DA:O.*** **A second Flash game titled** ***Dragon Age Legends*** **was released in 2011 to promote** ***Dragon Age II.***

It is difficult to accurately portray what *Dragon Age* represented at the time. While still independent, BioWare had given us some of the most memorable entries in the RPG genre. However, their then-recent dabbling in Eastern martial arts with *Jade Empire* and pulp science-fiction shooter RPGs with *Mass Effect* had baffled as many fans as it had pleased others.

Dragon Age, then, when first revealed in 2004, was seen as a return to form. A return to tactical battles, to a high-fantasy setting, to game mechanics uncompromised by console ports. While in line with the company's desire to create their own original IP, it was a spiritual successor to the *Baldur's Gate* series.

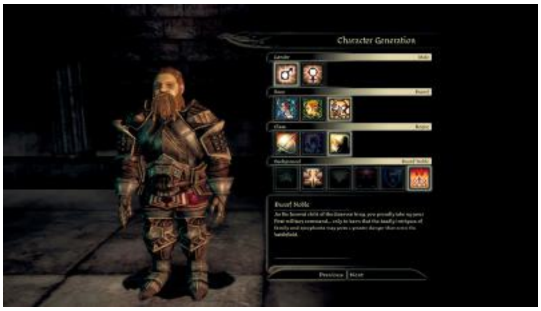
Rechristened *Dragon Age: Origins*, it held its ambitions up proudly, with an intro chapter that varied wildly depending on the race, class and social standing of your created character. The game thus sidestepped the usual memory-loss trope beautifully, giving you plentiful background on your character's life and possible motivations before tying it in smartly with an epic first chapter that demonstrated both the scope of the threat facing the world of Thedas and the rich background of cultural and political intrigue that tugged at its periphery.

Dragon Age stands to this day as a masterclass in introducing players to a game, world and characters, and sadly, few games have attempted beginnings with such scope. *Origins*, indeed.

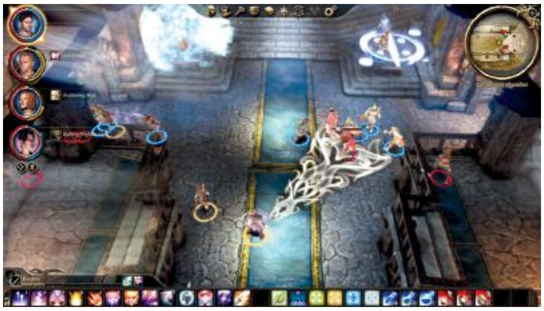
Then comes the combat that makes up much of the game. An active, party-based battle system in which the player controls up to four characters in real-time-with-pause combat. The game goes seamlessly into combat from Exploration mode whenever required, offering, in both modes, a good degree of camera control. The PC version also includes a third, tactical bird's-eye view with mouse-driven controls – a clear nod to the Infinity Engine games.

The complaint, for many, was that, in deviating from the rich *Dungeons & Dragons* ruleset, Bioware had not created an equally compelling alternative of their own, and the oversimplification of the system – fewer classes, fewer abilities, simplified skill trees and even fewer party members – made for less compelling encounters and less of a tactical challenge.

While there were highlights – one of the first fights against a towering, ogre-like enemy, for instance, or the dragon encounters – many of the battles felt cookie-cutter and by-the-numbers.



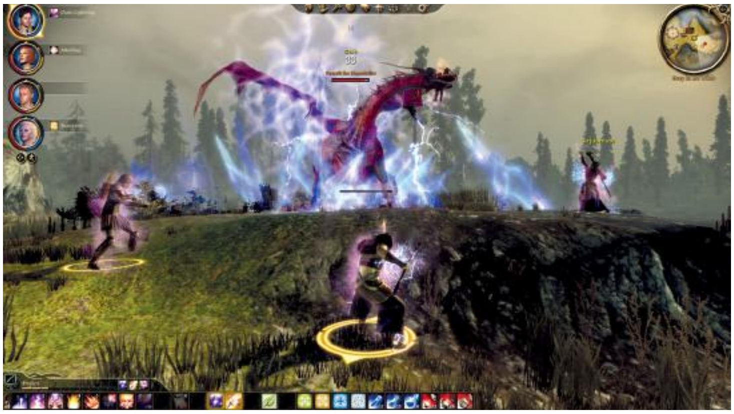
Character creation is limited to three classes and three races, but you can unlock 18 specialisations as you play



Combat offers both third-person and tactical top-down cameras, similar to those in the *Baldur's Gate* series

"The problem with the 'moral meter' is that even though we're offering you choices, it forces you to choose one or the other, and then you're on a fixed path [...] So, in *Dragon Age*, we don't have a good and evil meter; all the decisions in the game have solutions that are logical, where we thought, 'let's provide the player with solid reasons for doing these things', which allows us to have a lot of room for greyness in morality."

– David Gaider,
Dragon Age: Origins*' lead writer*



Spell-casting uses a mix of mana and cool-downs; some spells can be sustained, while others can be combined into powerful magic combos

Loot was similarly simplified. While equipping a new piece of gear for your characters did have a pleasant visual impact, it was relatively rare to find items that had a cool story behind them or a tangible mechanical benefit. And the lack of variety often made players wear the same armour set for dozens of hours.

The world, too, was missing the huge number of secrets and places to explore for exploration's sake that had left their mark on previous games. Some areas – like Ferelden's capital, Denerim – have their share of nooks and crannies, but most other areas feel a bit flat.

It was the writing, then, that saved *Dragon Age: Origins*. To this day it stands as some of BioWare's finest. The world was written with a scope and depth that paints a much broader picture than the relatively small setting of Ferelden, where the plot develops. Yet even this small corner of the world is rife with political plots and cultural/racial tensions. Be it the plight of the elves or the ostracisation of magic-users, your character is given much to think about.

And think about it you should, because the available dialogue options are much more nuanced than those of modern BioWare games. Gone is the duality that forced you to pick between demon and saint in *KotOR*, or between good samaritan and hard-assed rebel in *Mass Effect*.

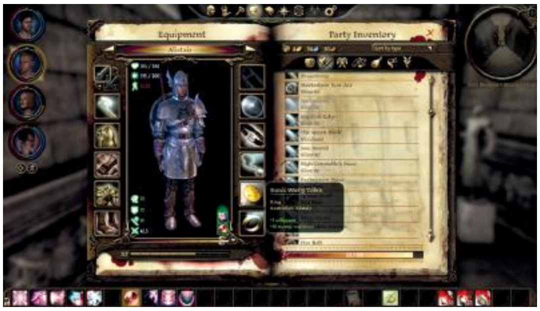
Here you can, as an example, really feel sorry for the way mages are treated, because you know a few and they seem actually quite decent people. But, on the other hand, some of these decent people seem to be involved in blood rituals and the summoning of demons, endangering common folk and themselves.

The lack of a moral compass that defines your character is filled by relationships with your party members – some of the most beautifully written and complex party members in BioWare's history. Depending on how they view your actions and words, they may either open up to you or even directly oppose or betray you – a fascinating loyalty system that can sadly be mostly cheated on via gift-giving, but remains one of the finest integrations between writing, player choice and mechanics.

The game was further complemented by a huge amount of DLC, most of which is story-driven and of very high quality; a modding toolset that gave us some great fan-made content; and a remarkably tight – if somewhat brief – expansion, in *Awakening*.

A mystery when first announced, *Dragon Age: Origins* is today seen by many (myself included) as BioWare's last great RPG, before they turned completely to a (still quite enjoyable) more mainstream kind of game. **LM**

***Dragon Age* had over 35 DLCs, ranging from stand-alone campaigns to extra party members, holiday gifts, pre-order bonuses and merchandise tie-ins. It was heavily criticised for featuring an NPC that advertised and sold DLCs in-game.**



Armour offers set bonuses and weapons can be upgraded with runes, but both are very limited and feel uninspired

Mods:

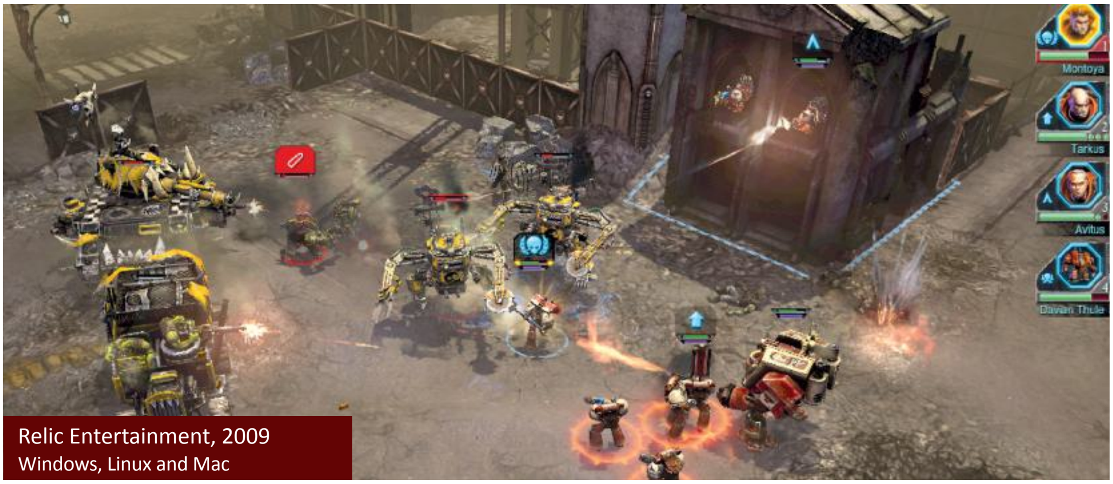
Extended Community Canon Project: A series of interconnected mods and campaigns that expand upon the game's world and lore.

Improved Atmosphere: Adds many subtle changes, improving the visuals, environments and events.

JX - Dragon Age Extended: A big mod pack that adds new classes, specialisations, bug fixes and tweaks.

Baldur's Gate II Redux: Module 1: Allows you to play through Irenicus' iconic dungeon from *BG2.*

Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War II



Relic Entertainment, 2009
Windows, Linux and Mac

***DoW2's* co-op and multiplayer modes were originally tied to Windows Live, but were moved to Relic's own servers in late 2014. To this day they remain quite popular.**

The original *Dawn of War*, released in 2004, was a very popular RTS based on the famous *Warhammer 40k* licence. Its sequel, however, dramatically changed the gameplay into what can be described as a unique real-time tactical RPG.

Gone are RTS elements such as base-building or resource-collecting – you now control a squad of four units, each with their own personality and skills.

The campaign casts you as Blood Ravens trying to stop a Tyranid invasion. There are many stories and optional missions, all presented by great voice acting. *Dawn of War II* can also be very hard – it has only one save slot and failing a mission might prevent you from retrying it or give time for the invasion to advance.

Your units all gain experience as they battle, allowing you to customise their skills and equip them with the *Diablo*-like loot you find. This aspect of *DoW2* is extremely satisfying – there's a lot of freedom in how to build your squad so their abilities complement each other, and finding items such as Terminator armour and Power Swords will have any *40k* fan grinning.

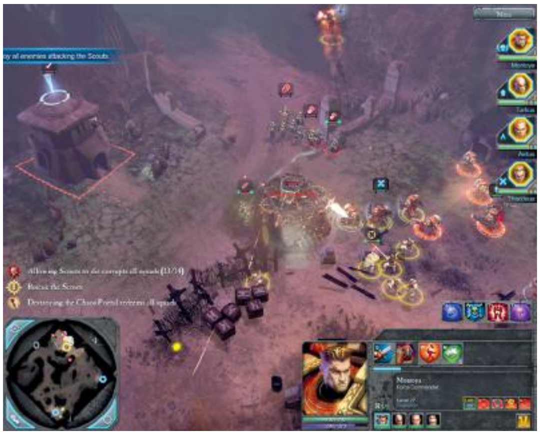
The first expansion, *Chaos Rising*, improves upon everything, especially the rather repetitive missions. Besides items and enemies, it adds a corruption system – optional objectives are presented and failing them or choosing the easy path will taint you with Chaos.

Those seeking to remain pure not only need to carefully approach each mission, but also refrain from using tainted equipment – which is far more powerful. Your corruption level also affects the game's ending.

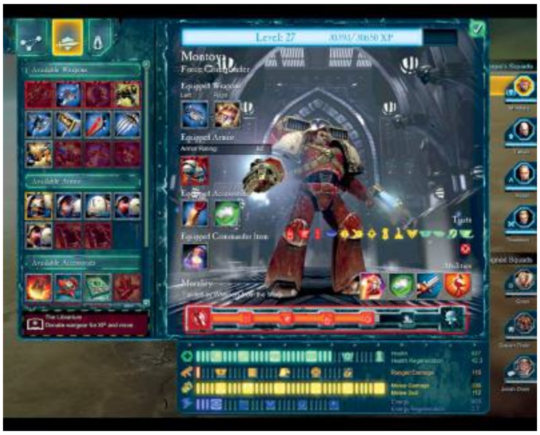
The other expansion, *Retribution,* is a mixed bag. It features six factions: Space Marines, Eldar, Chaos, Imperial Guard, Orks and Tyranids. Sadly, they all make you play the exact same dull missions and the RPG elements have been heavily cut. These campaigns now use the same system as the game's multiplayer matches, with resource-gathering and unit-building like those in a "lite" version of Relic's own *Company of Heroes*.

Retribution's big addition is the Last Stand mode, in which three players pick a unit each and combine to fight waves of enemies, earning XP and loot as they play.

With *Dawn of War III* returning to its RTS roots, *DoW2* remains a one-of-a-kind title, recommended for *40k* fans and those seeking a quick-paced challenge. **FE**



You control your squad in real time, using tactics, cover, skills and items to survive the game's overwhelming odds



From dozens of weapons and accessories to jetpacks, relics, Terminator armour and even giving into Chaos, there are a lot of customisation options

Venetica

DECK13 Interactive, 2009
Windows, Xbox 360 and PS3

Venetica begins with a rather unique premise: you are Scarlet, a young girl from the small town of San Pasquale. Suddenly, the town is attacked by assassins, your fiancée is killed and you meet with Death himself – who reveals that he is your father, and that you must help him save the world.

The game is a light action RPG in the vein of *Fable*, filled with side-quests to take and moral choices to make, but more focused on story and exploration. Most of the game is spent in a fantasy version of 16th-century Venice, divided into five large districts. *Venetica* is no *Assassin's Creed II*, but the team did a great job, filling the city with stunning sights and a few hidden side-paths, while using a colourful art style to compensate for the small budget.

The combat is simple to a fault. There are four weapon types – swords, spears, hammers and the undead-slaying Moonblade. Each one comes with different damage types, combat skills and combos you create by timing your attacks right. Or at least that's the theory, as it's too easy to get behind enemies and stun-lock them by quickly mashing the attack button.

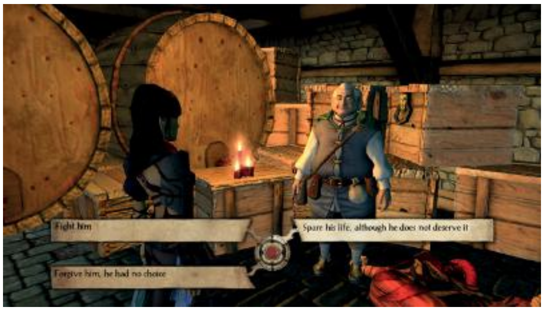
As the daughter of Death, Scarlet also has access to some handy powers. First of those is the ability to come back from the dead. As long as she has enough Twilight Energy, she'll always revive when slain. As the game advances, you'll unlock new powers, such as the ability to speak with the deceased, see through the eyes of ravens and briefly warp between the land of the living and the realm of the dead.

It's fascinating in concept, and occasionally the game allows you to make great use of these powers – like casually letting a robber cut your throat, then reviving and killing him. Sadly, those are very rare; *Venetica* fails to explore its immortal character and some powers are used only once during the story.

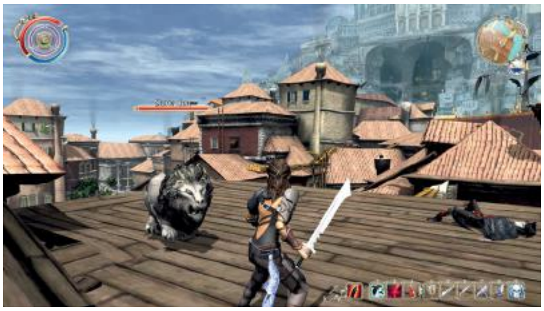
Scarlet is the main attraction of *Venetica*, being a strong and charismatic character while still allowing room for players to role-play her. You'll be able to choose Good, Neutral or Evil paths, as well as join one of the three guilds in Venice: Warriors, Messengers and Necromancers, each with their own set of quests.

Unfortunately, while the game works as a whole, its parts feel constrained and rushed. Elements such as the combat, the interface, Scarlet's powers and the consequences for her choices could all use a few more months of polish, and I can't shake the feeling that features were cut nearly at the end of development.

Despite these limitations and the poor combat, *Venetica* is still a charming, casual action RPG and definitely worth a play for fans of games like *Fable*. **FE**

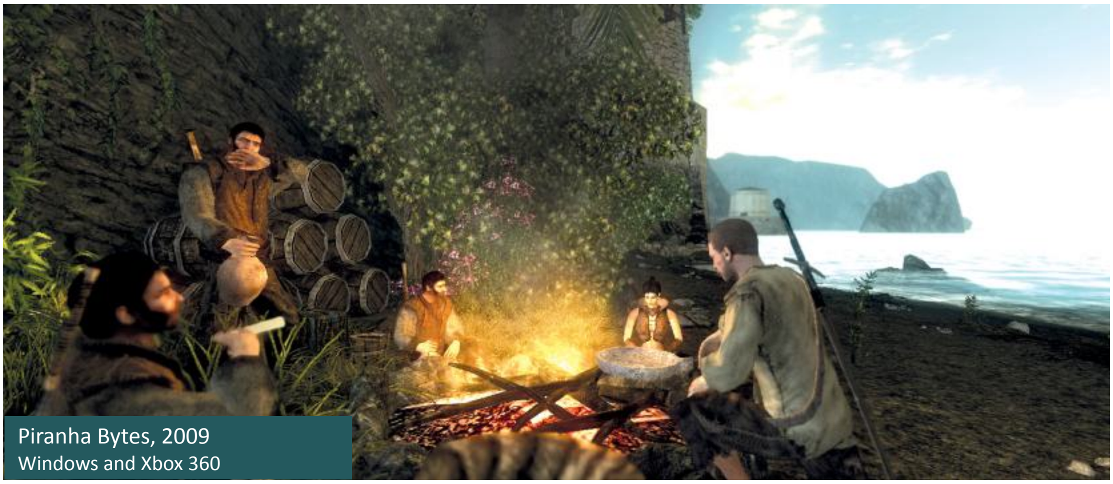

Fight him
Spare his life, although he does not deserve it
Forgive him, he had no choice

Venetica has morality and reputation systems, and even tracks how many people you kill, but rarely uses those in interesting ways



Combat is simple and exploitable, but the game doesn't overstay its welcome or tire players with endless filler fights

Risen



Piranha Bytes, 2009
Windows and Xbox 360

Due to a deal with publisher JoWood, Piranha Bytes lost the rights to the *Gothic* licence after *Gothic 3*. This led to the *Risen* series, but the contract expired in 2011 and the licence has since returned to them.

Gothic 1 and *2* established an open-world action RPG standard that, from certain perspectives, still hasn't been surpassed. They inspired a devout fanbase, which was less than pleased with how *Gothic 3* turned out. While the game tried many new things and had some merits, these got overshadowed by the numerous faults – some due to design, others due to publisher interference.

The fallout from the third instalment resulted in the developers, Piranha Bytes, parting ways with their long-time publisher JoWood and starting a new franchise – *Risen*. But *Risen* is a *Gothic* game in all but name; even the setting's backstory is essentially a follow-up to one of the endings of *Gothic 3*.

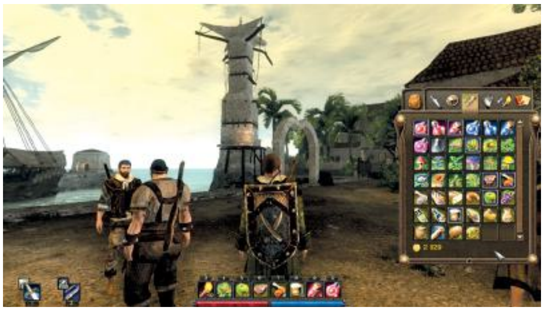
Set on a remote island occupied by three factions, packing challenging melee combat and their typical blue-collar German writing, *Risen* made *Gothic* fans feel right at home. Rewarding exploration and the iconic trainer system were strongly present alongside, sadly, some old flaws such as overly tedious dungeon areas. While the world may not be as coherent and atmospheric as that of *Gothic 1* and *2*, *Risen*'s improved graphics and friendly interface make it a good entry point for Piranha Bytes games.

Overall, fans were pleased. But the mainstream audience had lukewarm feelings towards it, especially on consoles. *Risen 2: Dark Waters* (2011) was a clear attempt to rectify that, embracing a whole slew of modern design trends for streamlining purposes.

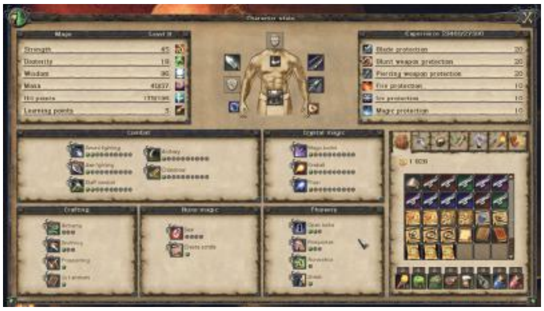
Combat was heavily simplified, devolving into mindlessly whacking at enemies. Guns were added, but given their simplicity and lacklustre animations, their only merit is speeding up fighting considerably. Ditto for adding companions. This is relevant because, for some reason, the developers decided to bloat the enemies' health to about double what it should be, making battles a long exercise in tedium. Given that melee fighting was one of the highlights of previous games, it was disappointing how *Risen 2* had fallen.

The skill system also got changed into a bizarrely overcomplicated mess: you gain glory (EXP) to spend on statistics and derived sub-statistics, then you go to trainers to unlock special abilities. Why?

In the previous games, the player simply gained Learning Points when levelling up, which were then spent with trainers by paying gold. The fact that this system was overcomplicated for no reason shows the designers were aimless in their creative process.

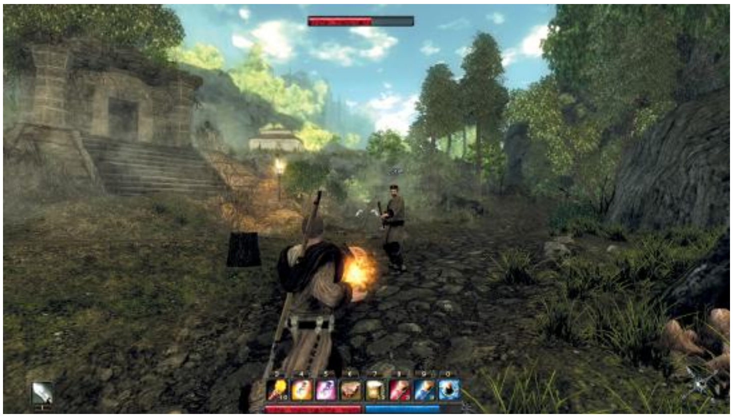


Harbour Town is one of the three hubs in *Risen*; its NPCs feel alive, and most of its quests have multiple solutions



Risen's character system is almost a straight copy of *Gothic*'s, as you use gold and level-up points to pay for trainers

> “If you ask three people what a *Gothic* game consists of, you’ll get five answers. That makes it very difficult to realise what players expect from a new *Gothic*.”
>
> *– Björn Pankratz, Gothic and Risen series’ designer*



In *Risen* you use runes to freely cast damage spells, but all the other spells require scrolls that you must find or scribe yourself, making them a valuable resource

Several other issues also plagued *Risen 2*: the seamless world was replaced by small islands that aren’t interesting to explore (some are just corridors); the factions were reduced; the quests are mostly linear and fetch-based; DLCs, fast travel and QTEs were added; and the game’s UI was redesigned for consoles. If not a bad game, it was mediocre and forgettable.

The game’s only real highlight was its aggressively advertised pirate theme. But, in the end, it was more of a façade. You can’t freely sail your ship; merely use it for fast travel; and the plot is about defeating a godlike being by the use of magical artefacts. Beyond some flavourful fetch quests, the game really isn’t all that pirate-oriented – or, at least, it’s more Johnny Depp than Errol Flynn in terms of atmosphere.

Risen 2’s adoption of modern gaming trends renounced all the things that fans appreciated about the *Gothic* series. Still, it did sell over a million units. It’s hard to say if this was due to the pirate theme or the marketing, but probably a combination of both.

Risen 3: Titan Lords (2014) was Piranha Bytes’ attempt to pander to everyone – which resulted in nobody being pleased. On one hand, it sold itself as “Piranha Bytes going back to its roots”, on the other it added a mini-map with quest-compass, a binary morality system and even “detective vision”.

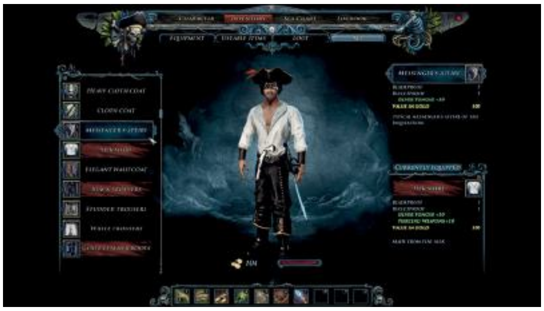
Combat was slightly better – no longer so rigid and with a bit of flow, reminiscent of the older games. But, given the excessive reliance on rolling and on charged blows, it looked ridiculously floaty. The game also returned to having three factions, each leading to different flavours of the Warrior/Mage/Rogue paths.

However, in trying to be everything for everyone, *Risen 3*’s world became a mishmash of pirate and medieval influences from all the other *Gothic* and *Risen* games, resulting in a frankly schizophrenic tone and the writing truly hitting rock bottom. It feels like a parody, especially since the protagonist sounds like Clint Eastwood doing an impression of himself.

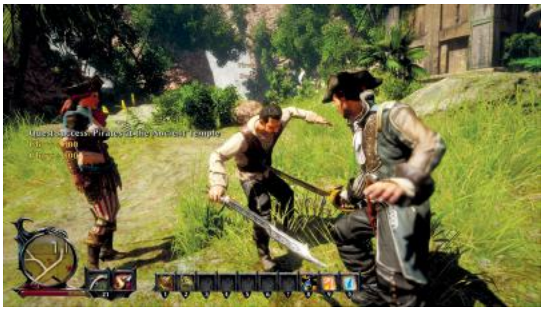
Risen 3 may be marginally better mechanically than *Risen 2*, but its lack of coherence and obviously pandering design makes it far less redeemable.

Piranha Bytes first tried going back; then they tried changing; and then they tried compromising. All attempting to catch a flame that’s ever-fading in the collective consciousness of the gaming crowd. The *Gothic* experience can’t simply be recreated for a modern audience – it needs to be reintroduced. Games like *Dark Souls* and *XCOM* show us that hard-but-fair is something that can flourish even today. Hopefully Piranha Bytes can achieve the seemingly Sisyphean task of getting back to their old glory. **LL**

There aren’t any big mods for the Risen series, but both *Risen 1* and *Risen 2* have unofficial patches to fix some minor bugs. You can also tweak their .ini files for improved shadows and draw distance.

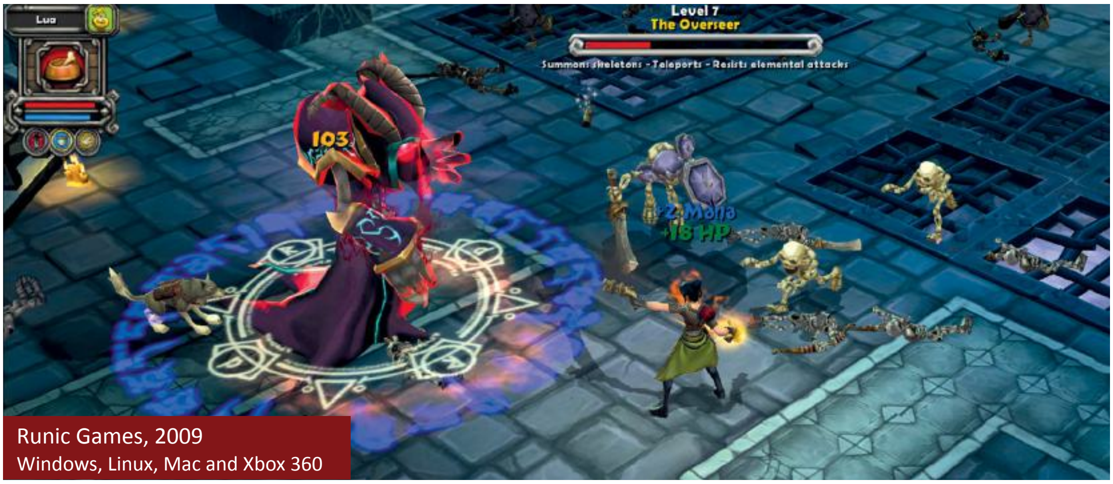


Risen 2’s UI was redesigned for consoles, and while the character system was expanded, most additions are pointless



Risen 3 tried to please *Gothic* fans while adding anything that was popular – from kill-cams to a busty side-kick

Torchlight



Runic Games, 2009
Windows, Linux, Mac and Xbox 360

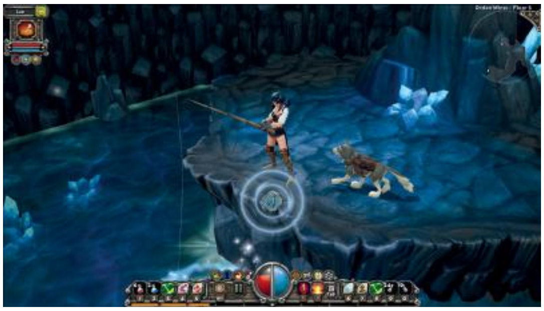
During the development of *Hellgate: London*, a team at Flagship Studios began working on *Mythos*, a simple online *Diablo* clone, to serve as a network technology test for *Hellgate*. The project was led by Travis Baldree, creator of *FATE*, and several former Blizzard North employees, who all grew quite fond of it. However, financial issues at Flagship led to the team being dismissed.

***Mythos*, the game the team at Flagship first began working on, was acquired by Korean company HanbitSoft, who continued development and released it in 2011. They have since closed its servers.**

To stay together, the team formed Runic Games, aiming to create a “spiritual successor” to *Mythos*. Before tackling a full-scale MMORPG, they decided to first test their concepts and polish their tools with a smaller, simpler and more inviting game. Eleven months later, *Torchlight* was released.

Despite the short development time, the team’s experience in the genre shines through. *Torchlight* is a charming and polished game that faithfully follows *Diablo*’s core design, while adding several proven concepts and improvements from similar games, plus some fun new ideas of their own.

Torchlight is set in a steampunk world, in which a small mining town finds trouble while excavating magical ores. As in the original *Diablo*, your task here is to descend the vast dungeon next to town, reach its lowest level and defeat the ancient evil within.



Torchlight reintroduces iconic features from *FATE*, such as Fishing and a pet that hauls your loot back to town to sell it

Spanning 35 randomly-generated floors, this deep dungeon contains several themed layouts that change every few floors, such as mines, ruins, caves, crypts and prisons. But these environments are far from claustrophobic – they present a sense of scale and verticality that’s rare in the genre, with large open areas and distant levels visible as you explore.

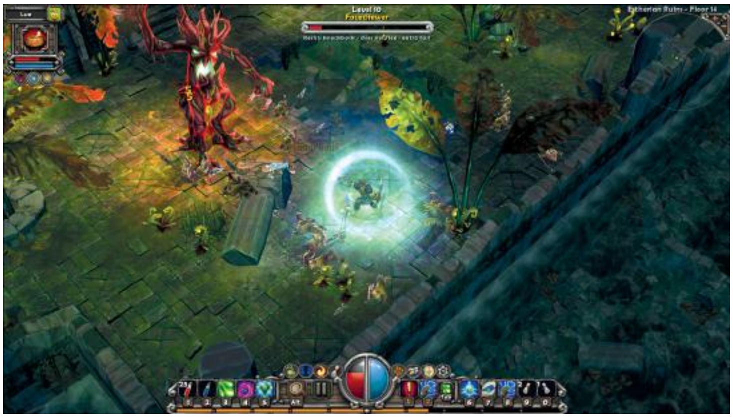
Torchlight offers three heroes – the Destroyer, focused on melee combat; the Vanquisher, a range-oriented rogue; and the Alchemist, specialised in magic and summoning. Each has three unique skill trees, with distinct specialisations.

There’s a great degree of flexibility here – skills are diverse, heroes can wield (or dual-wield) all weapon types, and there are spells found while exploring that can be learned regardless of class or stats. So you can easily play as a melee Alchemist with two axes, or as a gun-wielding Destroyer focused on spells. The trade-off is that some skills feel rather generic.

Feature-wise, *Torchlight* is like a collection of some of the best ideas in the genre, presented in a coherent and accessible package. The pets from *FATE* return, fighting alongside you and hauling extra loot back to town; the UI is efficient and friendly; you can enchant items, transmute them, socket gems and collect sets; there are side-quests, bounty hunts and boss battles every few floors; a “retirement” feature for those wanting to switch heroes; and even an endless dungeon available once you beat the game.

The art style is another of *Torchlight*’s highlights. It’s whimsical, with cartoony characters and painterly, faux-waterbrush environments. Some of the enemies are borderline cute, adding to the casual-friendly tone of the game. However, the short development time does rear its head here, for the lack of enemy variety is quite noticeable after a few hours playing.

> "We felt like *Torchlight*'s price point was a magic price point for that kind of game and we sold more than we anticipated. So there's a market for a $20 AAA game. Our idea was: let's just make games that feel like an AAA game and play like an AAA game, but strip away all the extraneous stuff and the expensive marketing campaigns and all that."
>
> *– Max Schaefer,* Torchlight*'s designer*



Most class skills in *Torchlight* aren't very impressive or unique, but the more generic character system does allow for more flexible playstyles

A smart move from the developers was to release *TorchED*, the editor for *Torchlight*. Highly moddable, the game was flooded by mods – from small tweaks to new features, classes and extensive overhauls.

Sadly, *Torchlight*'s biggest weakness could not be easily fixed: it lacks multiplayer. For many players, this is a must-have in games of this genre.

Despite limitations like this and a shorter overall length, Runic's decision to support mods and sell the game at a $20 dollar price point made it a success.

With *Torchlight* selling over one million copies, Runic decided to work on a sequel, expanding the game and adding the much-desired multiplayer.

Torchlight II (2012) is pretty much that – a larger and better game, with new classes, pets, enemies and items; a longer single-player campaign that spawns four acts all across the world; huge outdoor areas full of events, mini-dungeons and side-quests; a new game editor (GUTS) with Steam Workshop support; cleaner UI; and – finally – multiplayer co-op.

The game now contains four classes: Engineer, Outlander, Berserker and Embermage – each with its own Charge Bar, a unique resource that builds up during combat to fuel their powers. And more replayability features were added, such as New Game+ and Mapworks, a random map generator.

It's quite telling that, although *Torchlight II* was released just a few months after *Diablo III*, many found themselves preferring the "clone" to Blizzard's new entry in its genre-defining series. *Torchlight I* and *II* are both great games, highly polished, creative and inviting. Their lower price and the extensive mod library only add to their appeal. **FE**

Torchlight 1 Mods:

Wulf's Beginner's Mod Pack: Several mods to expand the game without changing its core experience.

Emberfiend: Adds crafting, recruitable companions, new quests, items and locations. Great for a replay.

Jarcho's Class Compilation: Offers over 20 new classes, such as Demonologist, Airbender and Ice Queen.

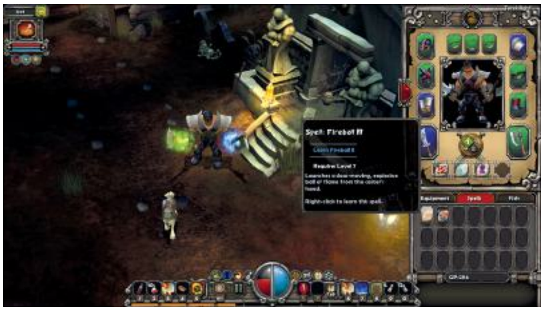
Torchlight 2 Mods:

Haknslash Essentials: A massive collection of mods, it adds dozens of new classes, pets, items, enemies and quests, plus a few small fixes and tweaks to the game.

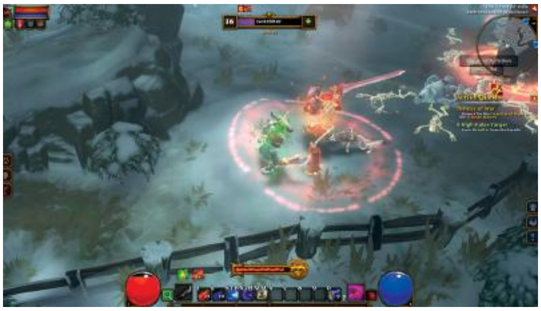
SynergiesMOD: A total overhaul mod, it offers new towns, rebalances most of the game, adds new classes, enemies, items, maps and features like Respec potions.

Far East Pack I and II: Part of a now-abandoned fan-made expansion, adds seven new classes and lots of great content.

An MMO version of *Torchlight* was planned, called *Torchlight Frontiers*. When Runic Studios closed down in 2017, the project changed hands and became *Torchlight III*, released in 2020 to mixed reviews.

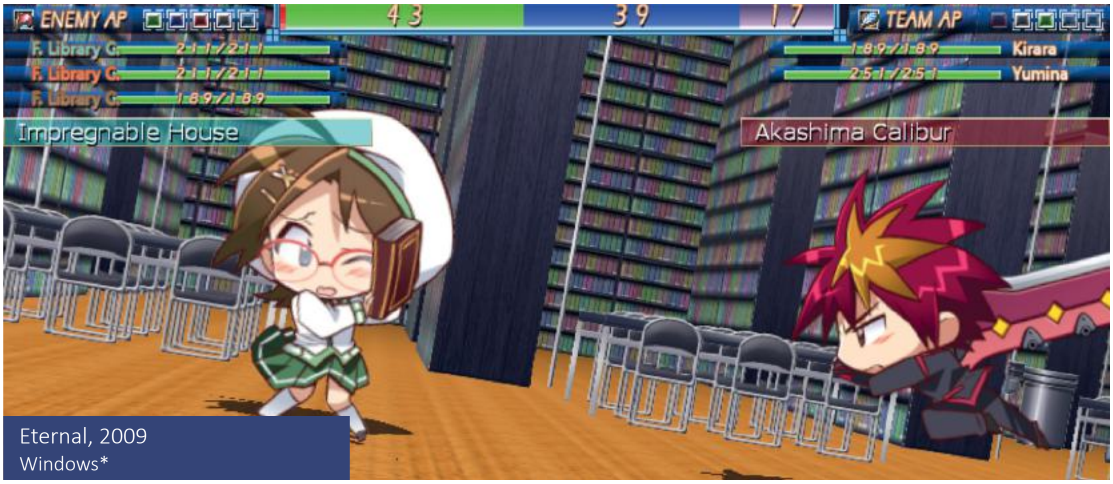


Each class has three skill trees they can level up on, but there are also spells that every character can use, regardless of class



Torchlight II features four all-new classes, each with its own specific Charge Bar, making them feel more unique

Yumina the Ethereal

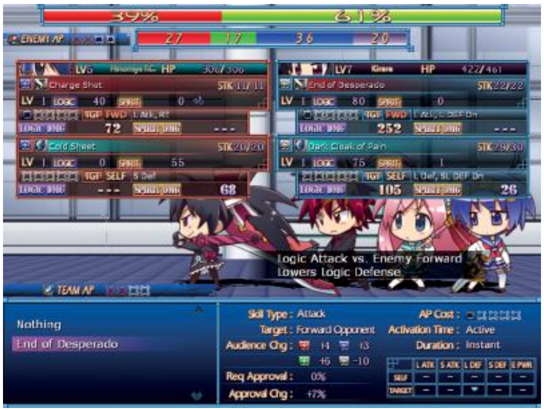


Eternal, 2009
Windows*

***Yumina* was localised into English by JAST USA in 2013. An expansion and a sequel have since been released in Japan.**

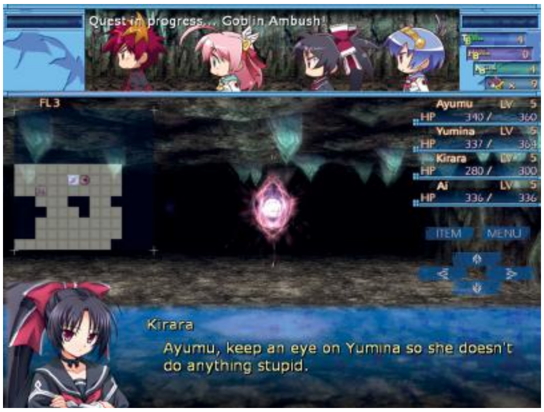
Yumina the Ethereal is a perfect example of modern, PC-exclusive JRPGs. Very different from popular console titles like *Final Fantasy,* these are focused on a niche market, usually mixing Visual Novel storytelling with challenging battles and complex mechanics – plus erotic scenes.

But leave prejudice aside – *Yumina* is above all a great, polished RPG, with clever mechanics and artful use of 3D backgrounds with 2D sprites.



Logic Attack vs. Enemy Forward
Lowers Logic Defense

Yumina packs several unique mechanics, stats, equipment, skills and systems; it's intimidating at first, but very logical and robust once mastered



Quest in progress... Goblin Ambush!

Kirara
Ayumu, keep an eye on Yumina so she doesn't do anything stupid.

As the game progresses, its gameplay expands, adding daily schedules, affinities and even first-person dungeons full of monsters

The plot starts (but doesn't stay) simple: to avoid failing in school, Yumina needs to become the next Student Council President, so that she can change the school rules. For this, she must win the Election War. It's all told in a typical visual-novel style, with humorous but overwritten dialogues. Thankfully, they can be skipped if you only care for the battles.

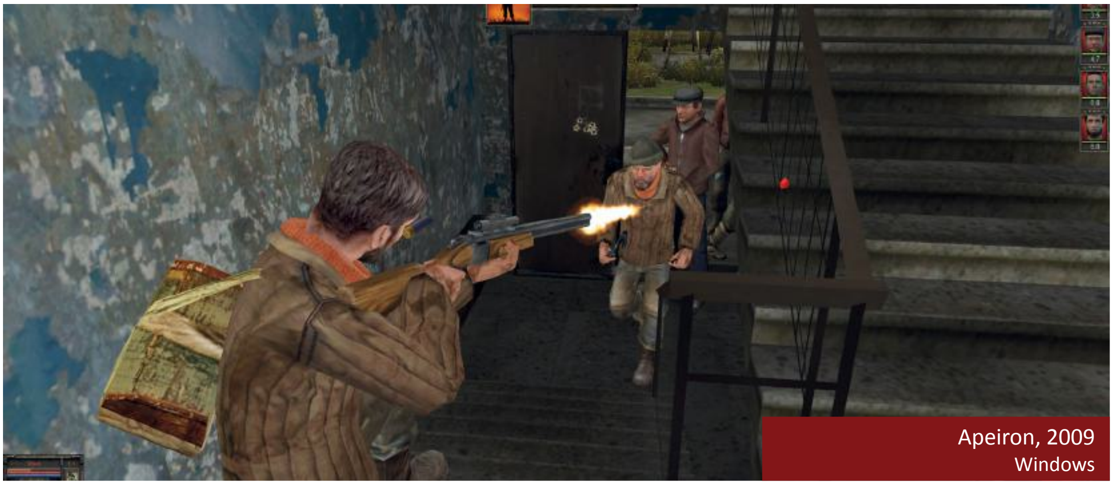
Indeed, the Election War is quite literal. You'll have to win "debates" that are in fact turn-based battles, with rivals shouting arguments – such as "Standardised testing is pointless!" – each time they attack. You control four characters, their available skills defined by their positions: the front "debater" usually attacks directly, while the three others act as support, using skills as "counter-arguments" to the actions of your front character and his foes.

In a very interesting mechanic, the mana pool is shared between friends and foes. It's locked at 100, but divided into four colours. Using red abilities, for example, reduces the percentage of red mana in the pool and increases other colours. Managing mana through skills, formation changes and special items is the key to battles, as characters can't use their skills if there isn't enough of the corresponding mana.

The game has various routes, leading to vastly different endings and final battles. Each time you finish the game, you're offered the chance to play again in a New Game+ mode, keeping your stats and items, but also increasing the difficulty. Beat all three routes and you'll unlock the fourth route – a final challenge leading to the "True Ending".

Yumina is not for everyone. Few will stand the anime-style art, insane plot, complex systems and the presence of awkward hentai scenes. But those who try it (there's a demo) will discover a challenging game, packed with content and unlike any other RPG. **FE**

Marauder



Apeiron, 2009
Windows

Apeiron's previous game, *7.62 High Calibre*, was a real-time open-world tactical RPG, heavily inspired by the *Jagged Alliance* series. While rather buggy and with a boring storyline, its complex simulationist combat and highly detailed "gun porn" conquered quite a few devout fans.

Marauder, also known as *Men of Prey* in Europe, is instead a linear, story-driven game, based on a book series of the same name from Russian author Berkem Al Atomi. The game places you in the boots of Akhmetzyanov, a Tatar muslin trying to survive in an alternate-history Russia in which the government collapsed, the US invaded and anarchy reigns.

Don't expect a pleasant story. Ahkmet himself is neither a virtuous paragon nor a noble-hearted antihero, but a man willing to do anything to keep himself and his wife safe. You will fight militias, raiders and cannibals, but also desperate, starved neighbours trying to take some of your precious food.

Marauder's combat perfectly reinforces its harsh atmosphere. The unique real-time-with-pause system from *High Calibre* is still here, if slightly streamlined. Every action takes a set time to be performed, and each has its pros and cons. The shotgun is a sure kill at close range, but it takes 0.42 seconds to ready it, while a pistol-wielding enemy can fire in just 0.08 seconds. You must take that into account in order to survive.

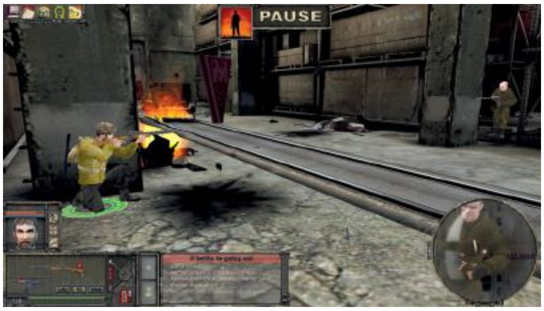
While I usually prefer turn-based tactical games, *Marauder's* intense and nerve-wrecking battles make great use of the game's elaborate real-time system. To add to the challenge, Ahkmet can only see what's in front of him and must otherwise rely on hearing to guess the enemy's position. This is further accentuated by the game's overwhelming odds, pitting you alone against dozens of looters or a full elite military squad with nothing but a rifle, some mines and your wits.

The game keeps the extensive and highly detailed armoury found in *High Calibre*, with almost a hundred weapons, and adds a few more RPG mechanics to the formula, such as character creation, a skill tree and lock-picking. You'll also get up to three companions as the plot advances, allowing for more complex tactics.

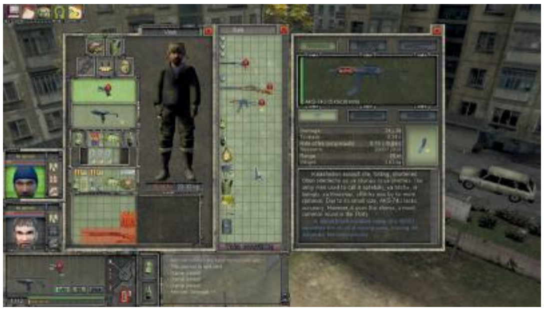
Sadly, *Marauder* is extremely linear. Besides the main story, you'll only be able to visit a bazaar, do a couple of side-quests and have one-line conversations with a handful of NPCs. And the dialogues are all in Russian, with poorly translated English subtitles.

Rough, challenging and intense, *Marauder* is a unique low-budget tactical RPG. Its bleak story, harsh setting, high difficulty and complex combat are a sure treat for cold-blooded tactical enthusiasts. **FE**

It's strongly recommended that you manually edit the game's config files. That way you can unlock higher resolutions and better camera controls.

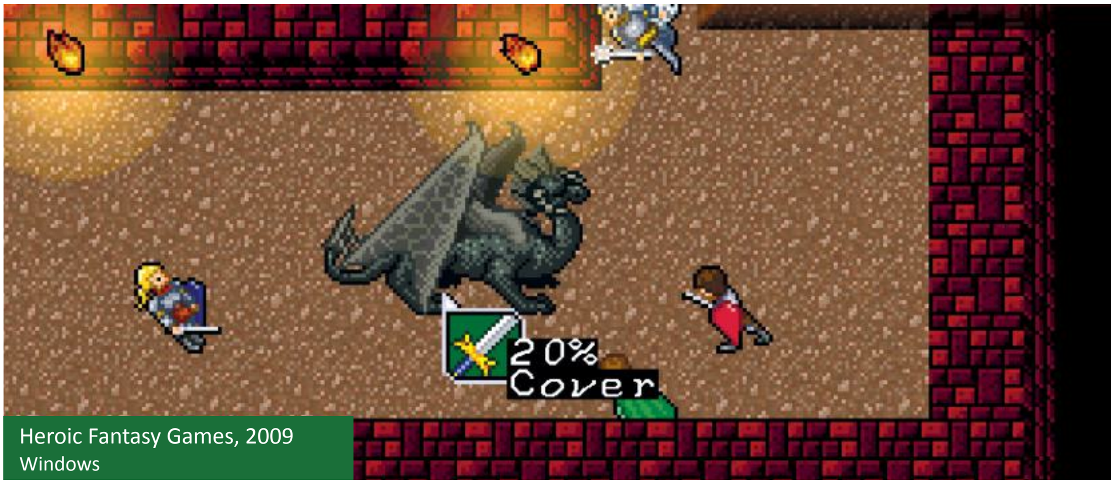


Firing from the hip is faster, but aiming allows you to target specific body parts and cripple enemies, or go for a lethal headshot



Weapons can be upgraded, equipped with accessories, fire different bullet types and even have their stocks folded, but they also decay, break and overheat

Knights of the Chalice



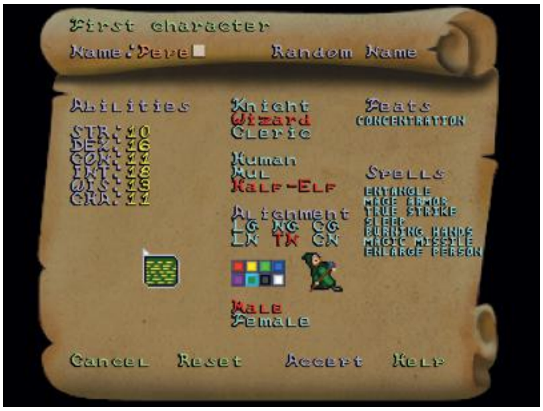
Heroic Fantasy Games, 2009
Windows

***Knights of the Chalice* uses the Open Game Licence, a public permission that allows anyone to freely create games based on *Dungeons & Dragons* 3.5 or 5th Edition.**

To this day, the debate still rages over which game can rightfully be called "the ultimate *Dungeons & Dragons* 3.5 game experience". While sectarians wage this endless war, the critical thinker will know that the answer depends entirely on which part of 3.5 you use to judge each game.

Looking for the most expansive implementation of the character system? Then surely no competitors can hold a candle to the quantity of options in 2006's *Neverwinter Nights 2*. Are you instead looking for strictly correct rules and combat implementation? Then 2003's *Temple of Elemental Evil* is the game for you. If story and role-playing opportunities are what you crave, *Mask of the Betrayer* is rivalled only by true classics like *Planescape: Torment*.

If, however, what you want is a consuming dungeon-crawling experience that harkens back to the Gold Box days, then no games can challenge 2009's masterfully crafted *Knights of the Chalice*. Perhaps the most criminally overlooked RPG of its era, it is no overstatement to call it one of the defining *D&D* 3.5 videogames.


First character
Name: Pere

You begin the game by rolling a party of four characters using *D&D* 3.5 rules, here limited to three classes and three races

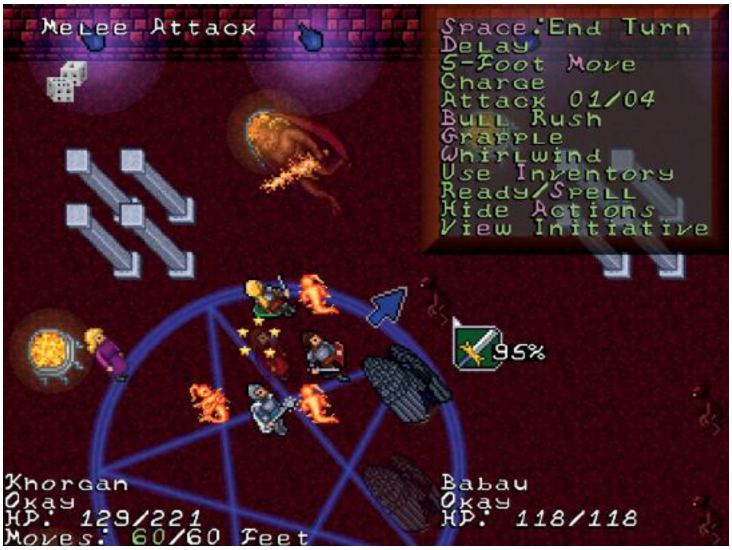
Knights of the Chalice is a turn-based, tactical combat simulator developed single-handedly by Pierre Begue. It is a vast game, with tons of dungeons to explore and foes to battle. The game was developed using the Open Game Licence – the "freeware" version of *D&D* 3.5 – and stays relatively true to the core rules. While you'll only find a small selection of races and classes, casters have a veritable library of spells at their disposal, while fighters can grapple, bull-rush and choose from a wide selection of feats.

In the story department, *KotC* offers only the most basic of explanations for your adventuring endeavours. The game's art assets are simplistic but incredibly endearing. The flat, top-down perspective was the most immediate turn-off for players when the game was released and remains so to this day, but do not let such details deter you. Within 30 minutes you'll be completely used to the camera, which will do its job perfectly in the fighting to come.

KotC is a dungeon crawler above all else, and as such presents your party of four with a run-of-the-mill adventuring quest, which soon turns into a sprawling epic spreading throughout the land. As you fight Orcs, giants and dragons in increasingly exotic locations, encounters remain handcrafted and take advantage of the strengths of the systems on display here. More often than not, the game forces you to shake up previously solidified tactics to overcome new obstacles.

Combat is fought on tile-based terrain, which will soon imbue you with the sensation of moving miniatures during a pen-and-paper session. Mages must be positioned correctly for Cone of Cold spells, clerics must use their Righteous Might with care so as not to block themselves from proper positioning when they turn Large, and fighters must hurry to grapple the enemy mage before he summons a deadly demon.

> "As an adventure designer you don't want the intellectual skills of the characters to take precedence over the player's thinking. […]
> If your character was stuck in a flooding room with three levers, each marked with different magic symbols, I would not roll for Spellcraft; I would show you a picture of the symbols and ask you which levers you want to pull."
>
> *– Pierre Begue,*
> Knights of the Chalice*'s creator*



Knorgan
Okay
HP: 129/221
Moves: 60/60 Feet

Babau
Okay
HP: 118/118

Knights of the Chalice's crude graphics are secondary next to the quality and complexity of its combat system

Throughout your tour of *KotC*'s world, you'll be greeted with ingenious design decisions that make the adventure flow. Like how you can revitalise your party completely by resting, but must do so at limited campfires that put pressure on your resource management. Or how the game presents you with fights that are sometimes too difficult for your current level, but hides useful resources like Arrows of Slaying nearby. Or how you can compensate for the restricted resting by crafting wands of healing or fireball scrolls.

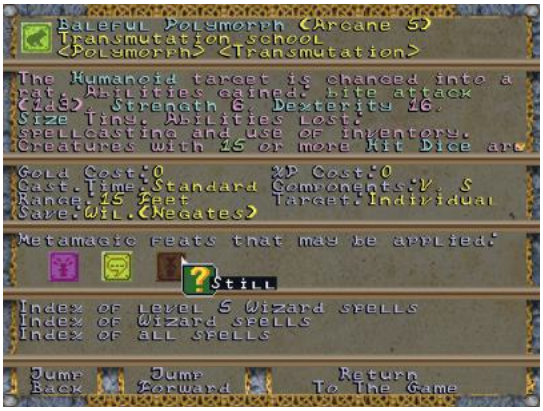
The crafting system is also the game's one, true weakness, however. You can craft every single piece of equipment your characters need, as long as you can pay. This, in turn, means that the loot you gather throughout your quest is only useful insofar as it can be sold for gold, allowing you to craft something better. Considering the game's dungeon-crawling nature, being rewarded with new, wondrous items now and again could have been one of the game's main draws.

The game is also balanced around a party of two fighters, a mage, and a cleric, and so taking along more casters will make the mid- and endgames easier.

In an effort that dwarfs those of almost every other game, *KotC* is perhaps the best-documented CRPG in existence. Thanks to a hyperlink-based tool that describes every aspect of the rule system, any clarification you might need is just a click away. As such, not only does *KotC* have one of the most complex rule systems of modern RPGs, but also one of the most transparent. It stands as a testament to the importance of good documentation and brings into question why even AAA RPGs are often incomprehensible and vague in this regard.

Knights of the Chalice is as classic an RPG as they come. Its complexity and depth will appeal to veterans of the genre, while its slick design and wealth of documentation make it easy to dive into for newcomers looking for a tactical challenge. **CG**

***Knights of the Chalice 2* was Kickstarted in 2020, raising £38,034. It's a complex, module-based RPG with new races, classes and spells, as well as an elaborate module editor tool. Its first module, *Augury of Chaos*, was released in 2022.**



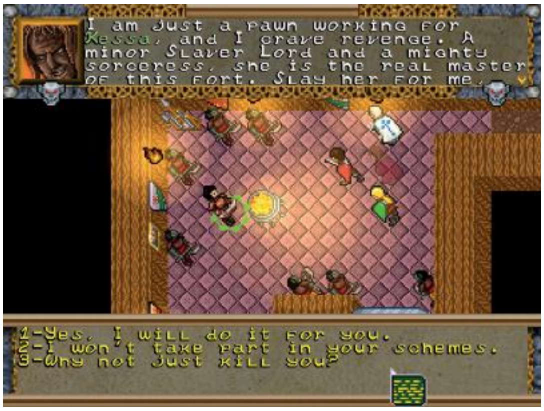
Baleful Polymorph (Arcane 5)
Transmutation school
<Polymorph> <Transmutation>

The Humanoid target is changed into a rat. Abilities gained: bite attack (1d3), Strength 6, Dexterity 16. Size Tiny. Abilities lost: spellcasting and use of inventory. Creatures with 15 or more Hit Dice ar

Gold Cost: 0
XP Cost: 0
Cast. Time: Standard
Components: V, S
Range: 15 Feet
Target: Individual
Save: Wil. (Negates)

Metamagic feats that may be applied:

If you're ever in doubt about a stat, feat or spell effect, just click on it and you'll get a detailed rule explanation

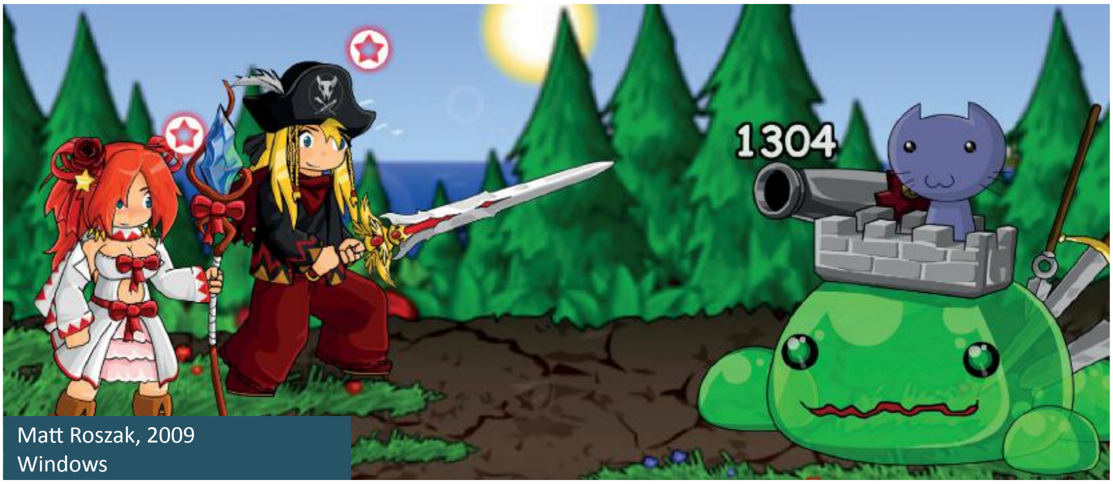


I am just a pawn working for Kessa, and I crave revenge. A minor Slaver Lord and a mighty sorceress, she is the real master of this fort. Slay her for me.

1-Yes, I will do it for you.
2-I won't take part in your schemes.
3-Why not just kill you?

The game is heavily focused on combat, but you'll also come across a few puzzles and talkative creatures

Epic Battle Fantasy



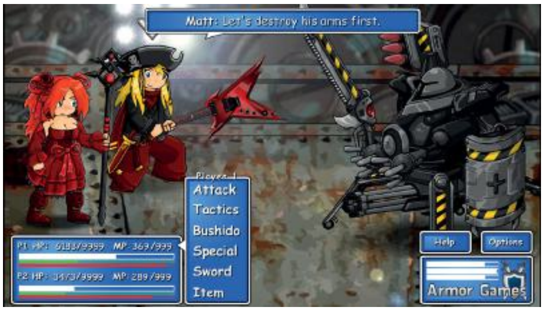
Matt Roszak, 2009
Windows

The online culture of the 2000s can be quite hard to explain to those who weren't there. This was a time when young people all over the world were connecting to the Internet for the first time and being overjoyed at how they could share their passions – music, anime, games, fan art, edgy jokes, porn, etc. – in a decentralized anarchist land where things like taboos and copyright laws were meant to be broken.

Matt Roszak's first works on Newgrounds were Flash parodies of the *Final Fantasy* series. He made several from 2004 to 2009, later reusing some elements on the *EBF* games.

It was before YouTube, Facebook and other social media, when one of the coolest online places was Newgrounds, a website dedicated to Flash animations and games. It offered everything, from popular memes like "All Your Base" to parodies like *Metal Gear Awesome* and the iconic, visceral animations of *Madness*. And it was the place where a new generation of indie developers began, such as the creators of *Castle Crashers*, *Super Meat Boy* and *Hollow Knight*.

This indie scene inside Newgrounds created many influential games, such as the ultra-edgy *Pico's School* (1999), the massively popular dating sim *SIMGIRLS* (2002) and the physics sandbox *Interactive Buddy* (2004). There were RPGs as well – from more standard ones like *Swords and Sandals* (2006), *Sonny* (2007) and *Mardek* (2007) to surreal fanfics like *Final Fantasy Sonic X*, an episodic RPG that ran from 2004 to 2008.



Matt: Let's destroy his arms first.

A key element in the first two games is how Matt can change his weapon mid-battle to adapt to the encounter

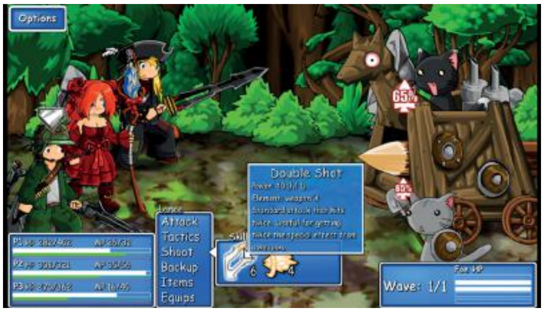
Among the hundreds of RPGs on Newgrounds, Matt Roszak's *Epic Battle Fantasy* series stands out – not only for its quality, popularity and longevity but also for how it encapsulates the spirit of the website.

EBF is part of a genre of gauntlet RPGs that focus on turn-based battles against increasingly stronger enemies – there's no exploration or even dialogue. You control two heroes – Matt, a dude with a pirate hat and several giant swords, and Natalie, a versatile spellcaster. Unlike in other games of this type, the heroes start out at max level, with 9999 HP, 999 MP and several weapons, spells and special attacks. You must manage them well and survive all the way to the final boss.

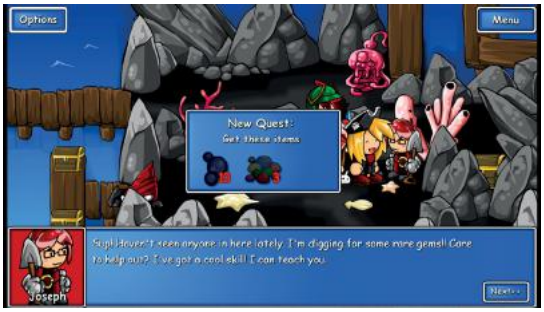
EBF embodies several tropes of Newgrounds culture at the time – the art has that distinctive Flash animation look; Matt is a self-insert of the developer; the soundtrack uses songs taken directly from *Final Fantasy*, *Zelda* and *Gurren Lagann*; you can summon Pokémon to help you, and the final boss is a zombie version of Goku from *Dragon Ball Z*. Just as Richard Garriott had done with *Ultima I* back in 1981, *EBF* is an amalgamation of everything that Roszak likes.

The game was very successful, getting over a million views on Newgrounds. Roszak then made a deal with Armor Games, a big Flash game portal that sponsored high-quality titles, and released a sequel just four months after the first game had come out.

Epic Battle Fantasy 2 removed the copyrighted content, like Pokémon, began using its own original soundtrack and addressed many players' complaints – adding save points and some character progression between battles. Combat became more complex, with status effects playing a bigger role. It still kept the gauntlet approach, with Matt and Natalie now facing a new threat: a Nazi. This second game was even more popular, leading to a more ambitious sequel.

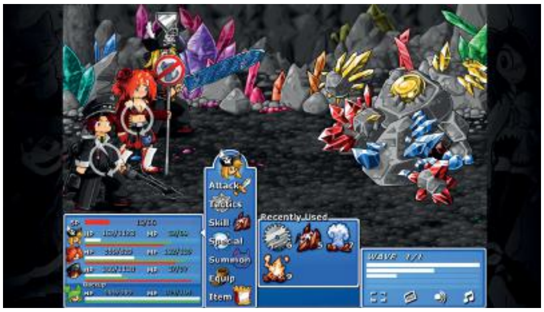

Options
Double Shot
Attack
Tactics
Shoot
Backup
Items
Equips
Wave: 1/1

EPF3 adds a third party member to the group and adopts traditional RPG tropes such as level-ups and equipment

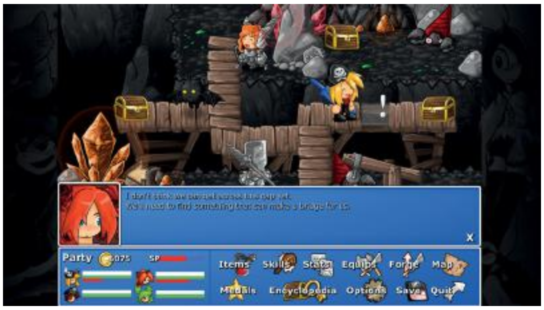

Options
Menu
New Quest:
Get these items
Joseph
Next...

Sup! Haven't seen anyone in here lately. I'm digging for some rare gems!! Care to help out? I've got a cool skill I can teach you.

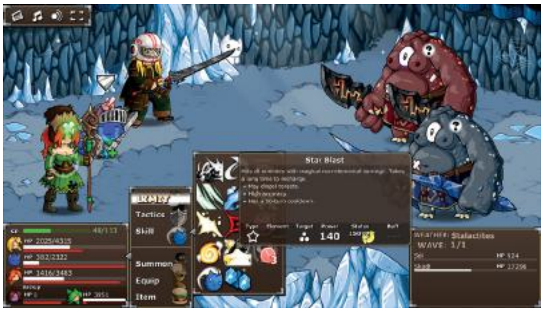
The third game's free roaming allows you to pick your fights, and adds NPCs with quests that can teach new skills


Attack
Tactics
Skill
Special
Summon
Equip
Item
Recently Used
WAVE 1/1

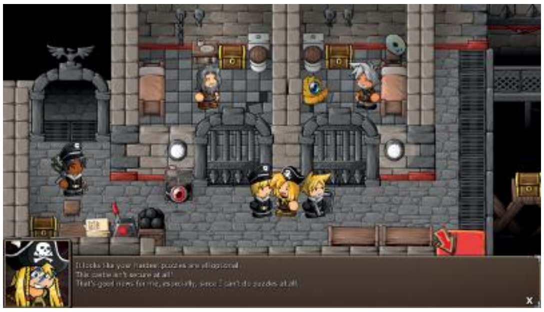
EBF4 adds another new character and an SP bar that lets you summon monsters to help you in battle


Party
SP
Items
Skills
Stats
Equips
Forge
Map
Medals
Encyclopedia
Options
Save
Quit

All quests are simple fetch quests, but the fourth game expands the dungeons to include puzzles and obstacles


Star Blast
Tactics
Skill
Summon
Equip
Item
140
WAVE: 1/1

EBF5 removed mana costs, pushing the player to use all powers and spells in order to beat the game's challenges



EBF5 is the biggest game in the series, offering well over 30 hours of content, plus extra end-game challenges

Epic Battle Fantasy III (2010) marks a shift for the series, becoming a traditional RPG with exploration, quests and level-ups. The two heroes are joined by Lance, the redeemed Nazi from the previous game, and roam the world to stop a demon that stole their powers.

The exploration layer greatly improved the game, allowing players to pick their battles. And since the party is fully healed after each encounter, they are even more brutal. The new game format also gave room for Roszak's humour to shine. The "2000s webcomic" tone can be hit or miss, but hits more than it misses.

EBFIII would get over 10 million plays across Flash game portals like Newgrounds, Armor Games and Kongregate. Roszak would create a few spin-offs – a platformer and a shoot-'em-up with the same characters – then return with *Epic Battle Fantasy 4* in 2013.

EBF4 was still released as a free-to-play title on Flash game portals, but also had a premium version on Kongregate and Steam. It continues to iterate the formula, adding another character to expand party-building options while polishing the presentation.

The fifth game, *EBF5* (2018) is the pinnacle of the series, and also a soft reboot. It re-introduces all characters, greatly improves the presentation and adds several things for hardcore players to pursue – from secrets and end-game challenges to the ability to capture any enemy and use their skills during battle.

While the first few games are mostly historical curiosities, the last title is a very competent RPG. It's a somewhat niche title, for people who love JRPGs, very challenging battles and silly humour. But if you're part of that group, *Epic Battle Fantasy 5* is a must-play. **FE**

The *EBF* games are freely available on Flash game portals like Newgrounds and Kongregate, or can be bought on Steam with enhancements and extra content.

2010-2014: The freedom to play (and create) any game

After years in the hands of a few giant publishers, the gaming industry experienced widespread democratisation as the new decade opened.

Digital distribution bloomed, with Microsoft and Sony incentivising small and mid-sized studios to release games on their consoles' online stores, leading to massive indie hits and experimental titles like *Journey* (2012). Meanwhile, Steam expanded its control over the PC market. With the Greenlight system introduced in 2012, it became possible for any developer to try to get their game on the platform. The Early Access service added in 2013 also allowed studios to sell work-in-progress titles, helping them build a community and raise the funds required to finish the game.

Crowd-funding and subscription services like Kickstarter, Indiegogo and Patreon also empowered creators and teams of all sizes to pursue projects that no publisher would fund, asking the audience for help financing them. By 2017, Kickstarter had over 10,000 game projects successfully funded. Game engines and console development kits started to get cheaper as well – some engines even being offered for free.

Still, the biggest revolution came from mobile games. *Angry Birds* (2009) had shown the potential of smartphones, and the industry quickly followed with mega hits like *Puzzles & Dragons* (2012), *Clash of Clans* (2012), *Candy Crush Saga* (2012), *Roblox Mobile* (2012) and *Monster Strike* (2013). Thanks to the widespread use of smartphones, they would quickly rival the PC and console markets. By 2014, *Puzzles & Dragons* was already reporting 32 million downloads and $1 billion in profits.

The rise of mobile gaming and indies also changed game prices. While AAA games were still sold for $60, other prices became common, with mobile apps selling for $0.99 and indies anywhere from $5 to $20. This sounds like common sense now, but it was a long process – in 2009, Runic's decision to sell *Torchlight* at $20 was seen as a bold pricing strategy.

Foreign markets grew closer. The first *Dark Souls* was only ported to PCs in 2012 thanks to a public petition, but it quickly became common to see games from major Japanese studios on Steam, as well as doujin (Japanese amateur/indie) titles such as *Recettear* and *One Way Heroics*, courtesy of several new localisation companies.

All this eventually led to what some call the "indie bubble", as more and more games are released each year, making it harder for titles to get noticed. On the other hand, players also had issues with some developers pitching games on Kickstarter or Early Access but never finishing them.

Still, it's a very welcome change from the strict industry structure of the mid-2000s, offering an unrivalled diversity of titles. Games now come in all sizes and prices, for several different platforms, offering something for every type of gamer.

Trends:

Crowd-funding: Online crowd-funding dates back to the early 2000s, with platforms like ArtistShare helping fans finance their favourite artists. But everything changed in 2012, when Tim Schafer went to Kickstarter to pitch an adventure game. Asking for $400,000, he received over three million dollars, drawing everyone's attention and starting a boom of crowd-funded projects – from small indie games to multi-million-dollar entrepreneurships such as the OUYA console and the Oculus Rift VR headset.

DOUBLE FINE
ADVENTURE

Tim Schafer's Double Fine Adventure project was released in 2014, under the name Broken Age

---

YouTubers and Streaming: While YouTube was founded in 2005, the 2010s was when gaming channels exploded – celebrities such as PewDiePie, Markiplier and TotalBiscuit overshadowed traditional news websites, as people began to rely on YouTubers for information. Streaming (and watching) games became a massively popular hobby, with Twitch emerging as a dedicated platform, consoles adding built-in streaming features and events like eSports tournaments reaching millions of viewers.

The 2014 *League of Legends* World Championship finals were watched by over 27 million people

---

Motion Gaming: In 2010, both Microsoft and Sony released their answers to the Wii's surprisingly popular motion controllers: the Xbox 360's Kinect and the PlayStation Move. Both companies strongly pushed their accessories, but neither managed to connect with their audiences and fulfil expectations. Microsoft still tried to force its new Kinect 2.0 alongside the Xbox One but eventually abandoned it, while Sony ended up integrating the Move controllers into its PlayStation VR.

The Kinect sold over 24M units and the PlayStation Move about 15M units, but neither of them were considered successes

---

The **iPad** is released. The middle ground between mobile phones and dedicated consoles, it became a popular platform for indie games.

The **Nintendo 3DS** is an evolution of the DS, packing stereoscopic 3D effects and a great library of games. It sold 75M units.

The **PlayStation Vita** was released to compete with the 3DS, but was quickly abandoned by Sony. Sales were estimated at 10-15M.

Steam Greenlight allows anyone to submit their games to Steam, opening the floodgates to thousands of smaller developers.

The **PlayStation 4** is released. One of the most successful consoles of all time, its multiple versions would sell over 117 million units as of 2022.

2010 | 2011 | 2012 | 2013 | 2014

Twitch is born as a gameplay streaming side-channel of Justin.tv. Over the next few years its popularity would explode, reaching 30M unique daily visitors and a peak of 6.5M concurrent users in 2020.

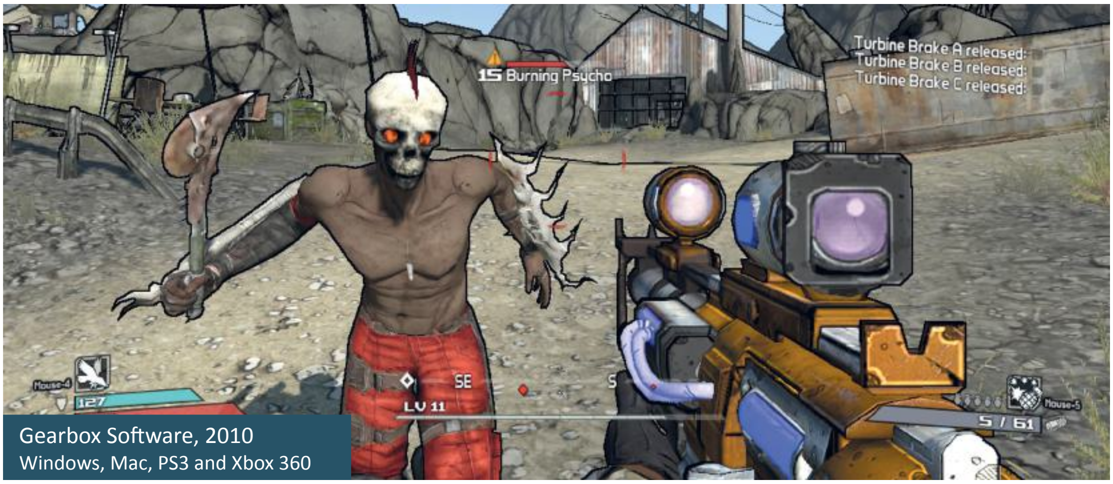
Skylanders: Spyro's Adventure popularises the concept of using collectible toys to interact with video games. The series sold over 300 million toys as of 2016 and led to many similar products.

Puzzle & Dragons is released. A "gacha" monster-collecting game, it's the first big smartphone hit in Japan and one of the highest-grossing games of all times, reshaping the Japanese industry.

The **Wii U** is released, keeping its predecessor's movement controls and introducing a new touch-screen gamepad. Suffering from a lack of third-party support, it sold only 13 million units.

The **Xbox One** is released, originally bundled with a Kinect 2.0, which was later abandoned. As of 2022 it sold an estimate of around 50 million units across its multiple versions.

Borderlands


Turbine Brake A released:
Turbine Brake B released:
Turbine Brake C released:
15 Burning Psycho
House-4
127
SE
LV 11
S
House-5
5 / 61

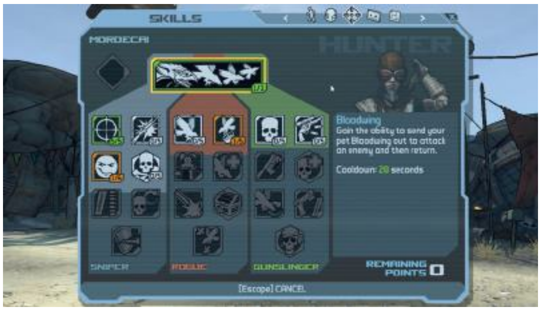
Gearbox Software, 2010
Windows, Mac, PS3 and Xbox 360

Ask someone to describe a *Borderlands* game and the first things they'll mention will probably be the comedy setting and the faux hand-drawn art style. These features set the series apart in the crowded shooter market and make *Borderlands* visually striking and unique.

The odd thing is that these attributes were really last-minute additions. The original *Borderlands* began development as a grim game with a serious art style, and didn't become the Borderlands we know today until the last few months of development. This is a series with defining attributes that didn't take shape until the last possible moment, and had to overcome a lot of internal pressure to do so.

In *Borderlands*, you play as one of four Vault Hunters (basically outer-space treasure hunters) searching for fame and fortune in the world of Pandora. In your way stands a never-ending army of psycho bandits, indigenous wildlife and killer robots. Each Vault Hunter has their own set of powers that favour a particular playstyle. Some will lend themselves to risky up-close engagements, some are suited to using long-range weapons, and others are stronger in support roles for those who want to play co-op with their friends.

***Borderlands'* art was changed months before release and became nearly identical to that in a 2007 short animation called *Codehunters.* Gearbox later acknowledged the inspiration, but never properly credited the original artist.**



Bloodwing
Gain the ability to send your pet Bloodwing out to attack an enemy and then return.

Cooldown: 20 seconds

Each character has a particular playstyle and three unique skill trees: Mordecai, for example, can specialise in pistols or sniper rifles, or improve his pet's attacks and skills

As you gun down waves of enemies, they drop randomised weapons and gear. In a lot of shooters, the gameplay can eventually get stuck in a rut, with the player eventually settling on one or two weapons that suit their playstyle, to the exclusion of all else. But in *Borderlands*, the constant supply of absurd weapons can keep the gameplay fresh.

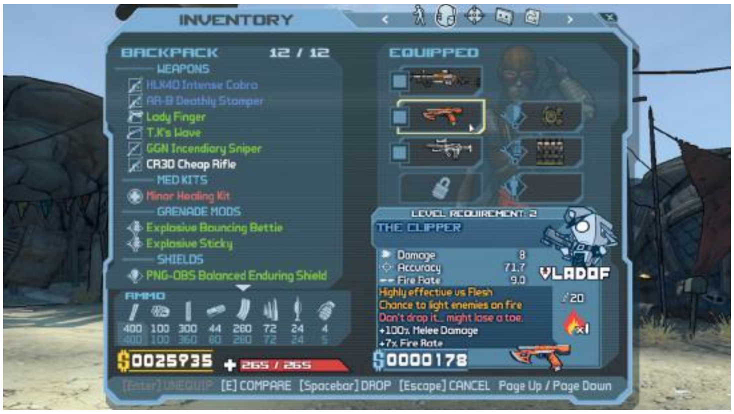
Maybe right now you're really attached to a shotgun that shoots explosive rounds, but an hour from now you'll find a pistol that sets people on fire and allows you to throw unused bullets like grenades if you reload prematurely. After that you might fall in love with an assault rifle that can melt through enemy armour with corrosive damage and has a scope attachment that allows you to use it like a sniper rifle.

They follow the traditional coloured rarity tiers of *Diablo II*, with some of the legendary weapons having more exotic abilities. The variations in recoil, damage output, reload speed, magazine size, accuracy and fire rate are endless, so that every gun feels unique. On top of this, the player levels up on a regular basis, which means they're always gradually out-levelling their guns and thus need to be on the lookout for replacement gear of higher levels.

While the comedy and art style give *Borderlands* its unique personality, the gameplay is what sets the series apart and keeps players interested for hundreds of hours. The *Borderlands* formula is a marriage of two vastly different genres that combine to become more than the sum of their parts.

Half of *Borderlands* is derived from loot-driven action RPGs like *Diablo*, in which the player cuts through waves of foes in search of rare items. Most of the game is spent furiously clicking on monsters, with the player stopping only to sort through their loot, look for interesting items, and sell off the rest in town.

> "The thing that compels us towards growth, discovery and choice in RPGs, that sort of long-range loop, it's not mutually exclusive with the short-term, visceral, base-level joy we get from moving and shooting in a shooter. […] If we marry them together, there's a real opportunity there to pave new ground. That was *Borderlands* from the very beginning."
>
> *– Randy Pitchford, Gearbox's co-founder*


INVENTORY
BACKPACK 12 / 12
WEAPONS
HLK40 Intense Cobra
AR-B Deathly Stomper
Lady Finger
T.K's Wave
GGN Incendiary Sniper
CR30 Cheap Rifle
MED KITS
Minor Healing Kit
GRENADE MODS
Explosive Bouncing Bettie
Explosive Sticky
SHIELDS
PNG-OBS Balanced Enduring Shield
AMMO
400 100 300 44 280 72 24 4
400 100 360 80 280 72 24 5
$0025935
265 / 265
EQUIPPED
LEVEL REQUIREMENT: 2
THE CLIPPER
Damage 8
Accuracy 71.7
Fire Rate 9.0
VLADOF
Highly effective vs Flesh
Chance to light enemies on fire
Don't drop it... might lose a toe.
+100% Melee Damage
+7% Fire Rate
$0000178
[Enter] UNEQUIP [E] COMPARE [Spacebar] DROP [Escape] CANCEL Page Up / Page Down

Besides thousands of weapons, you'll also have to pick a shield and grenade mods, as well as manage all the different ammo types

This shower of loot creates a cycle of anticipation and revelation similar to that of luck-based games like slot machines or loot boxes. Only instead of paying money and opening boxes, the player is wiping out clusters of foes. There's always the promise that the player might find something really special in the next encounter. This system of randomised loot tickles the reward and pattern-matching parts of the brain, and is what gives these kinds of games a reputation for being addictive.

The drawback with the *Diablo*-style gameplay is that it can be a little monotonous and dry. Sure, the player might get a little tingle of excitement every few minutes when an item drops and they stop to see if they got anything good, but between those moments there's a lot of mouse-clicking and pressing the same few hotkeys. It's not a terrible experience, but it doesn't really hold up on its own. Imagine playing a *Diablo* clone with the random loot removed. It would make for a game of very limited appeal.

The other half of the *Borderlands* experience comes from your typical first-person shooter mechanics. The player needs to shoot bad guys, dodge incoming attacks, manage ammo and strike a balance between taking cover and doing damage. It's fast, violent and visceral.

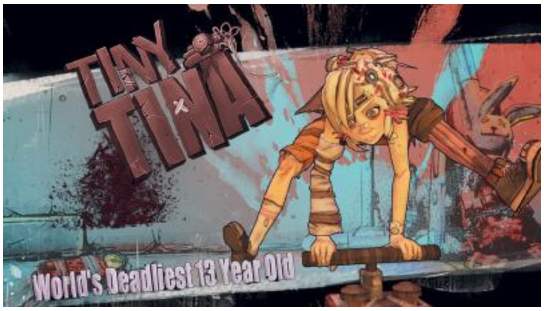
The drawback of first-person shooters is that they can suffer a bit from "intensity fatigue". If you've ever tried to play a classic shooter like *Doom* or *Quake* for any length of time you've probably noticed that the constant redline action can become paradoxically boring. An experience can't sustain maximum action forever and eventually the sound and fury can get to be numbing.

By blending these two genres, *Borderlands* creates an experience that has the advantages of both while mitigating their shortcomings. The wild gunplay is a lot more engaging than *Diablo*'s mouse-clicking. At the same time, the shower of loot and the ever-changing selection of weapons are there to save the player from intensity fatigue and from falling into the two-weapon rut. In a world filled with clones and imitators, *Borderlands* stands out as a unique franchise with a gameplay style and personality all its own.

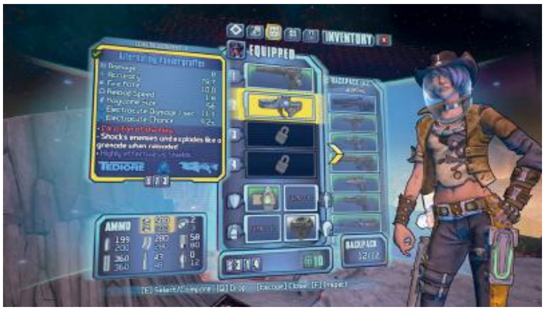
The two follow-up titles have refined the formula without straying from the original. *Borderlands 2* (2012) zeroed in on genre-savvy meta-humour, and *Borderlands: The Pre-Sequel* (2014) introduced new gameplay tweaks.

Pre-Sequel has the stronger mechanics, while *Borderlands 2* has stronger jokes, characters, and story. I think we're still waiting for the ultimate realisation of the *Borderlands* formula that takes the best parts of all the entries and brings them together in a single game. **SY**

In 2014, Telltale Games began to release *Tales from the Borderlands,* an episodic adventure game based on *Borderlands.*

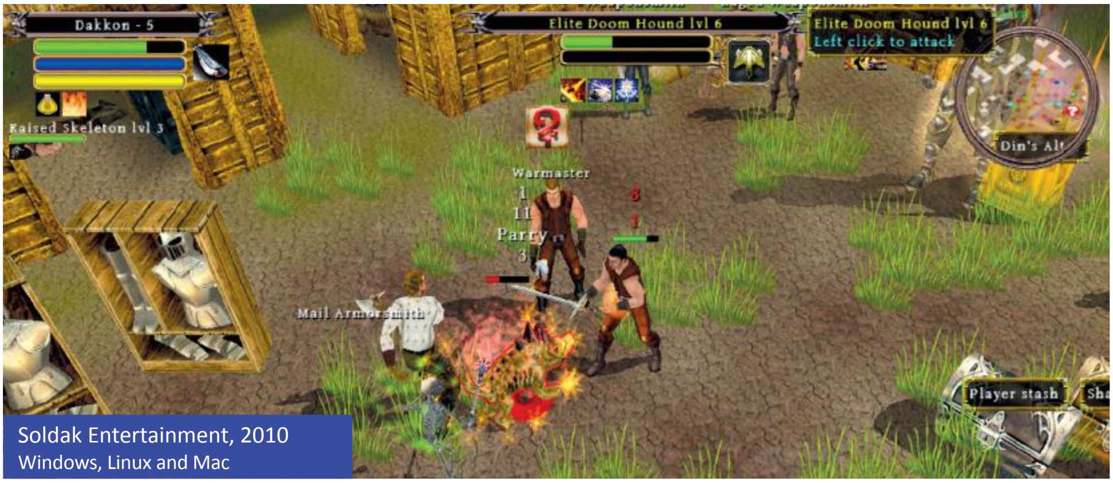

TINY TINA
World's Deadliest 13 Year Old

Borderlands 2 polished the experience with a slicker design, new characters and a bigger focus on the meta-humour


INVENTORY
EQUIPPED
TEDIORE
AMMO
BACKPACK

Pre-Sequel expanded the gameplay, adding double-jumps, low gravity, a ground-slam and a better in-game economy

Din's Curse


Dakkon - 5
Raised Skeleton lvl 3
Elite Doom Hound lvl 6
Elite Doom Hound lvl 6
Left click to attack
Din's Alt
Warmaster
Parry
Mail Armorsmith
Player stash

Soldak Entertainment, 2010
Windows, Linux and Mac

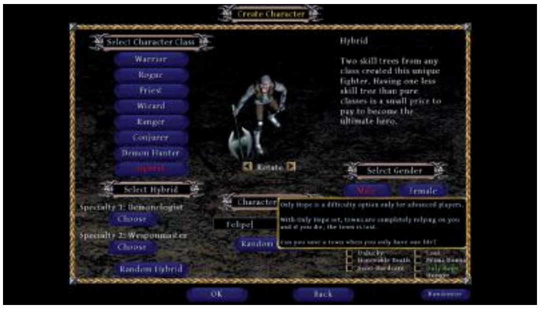
Back in 2007, Soldak released *Depths of Peril*, an action RPG in which you led a barbarian tribe and had to not only kill monsters, but protect your town and deal with other NPC factions as well.

While it was a dynamic game, it was also a fast-paced multitasking challenge. Miss one tiny bit, and half of your tribe would end up dead and the other half raided while you're out hunting savage monsters.

Seeking to improve upon this formula, Soldak created *Din's Curse* – a faithful heir to old Roguelikes, married with *Diablo*. The game controls like *Diablo*, uses the same coloured loot system and also has an unfortunate town built over a multi-level dungeon. But there's a key difference – the town and NPCs you must protect are all active, evolving entities.

In 2019 Soldak released *Din's Legacy*, a sequel featuring updated graphics and features taken from Soldak's other games. It's a perfect entry point to their games.

A log keeps you informed about what's going on while you play – from NPCs in dire need to monsters levelling up


Create Character
Select Character Class
Warrior
Rogue
Priest
Wizard
Ranger
Conjurer
Demon Hunter
Hybrid
Hybrid
Rotate
Select Gender
Male
Female
Select Hybrid
Specialty 1: Demonologist
Choose
Specialty 2: Weaponmaster
Choose
Random Hybrid
Character
Felipel
Random
OK
Back

Two skill trees from any class created this unique fighter. Having one less skill tree than pure classes is a small price to pay to become the ultimate hero.

Only Hope is a difficulty option only for advanced players.

With Only Hope set, towns are completely relying on you and if you die, the town is lost.

Can you save a town when you only have one life?

Din's Curse offers seven different classes, each with three skill trees; you can also create a hybrid that uses any two skill trees

Citizens will use equipment that you donate, buy items, go into debt, argue (and kill) each other, be killed by monsters, die of starvation or simply flee. They will also offer quests – from personal favours like delivering packages and gathering ingredients to helping the town by recruiting a new weaponsmith, killing a monster leader, finding water, etc.

If all the key NPCs die, it's the end of your town, but not the game – you can try to save another town.

Monsters aren't static either – they are all active, with their own agendas and allies. Skeletons will get along with zombies, but will kill hell-dogs. They will level up and grow in power, and the hell-dogs can later arise as undead! Bosses are even worse: they gather minions to attack your town, build nasty things and raise their own minions – which then scatter and start to do the same, repopulating the dungeon.

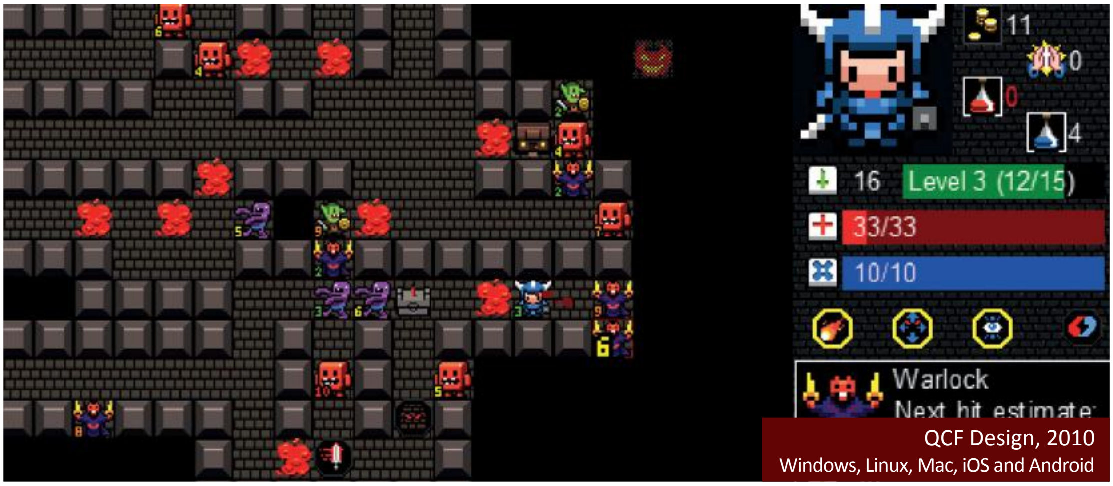
And so you might be hunting a nasty orc mage then have to immediately return to town to stop an invasion from the dungeon depths, find out who built the offending monster gate, fight the guilty citizen, help others with their health issues, then be asked to destroy a weather machine that the aforementioned orc mage has built while you were gone.

You get the picture. *Din's Curse* always has something for you to do. But, unlike *Depths of Peril*, you can fully customise how you want to play it.

It's you who sets the pace of quests, dungeon depth, number and levels of monsters. You can make the game easier, disabling town invasions altogether, or make it much harder, speeding things up, buffing monsters or handicapping yourself with restrictions.

All in all, *Din's Curse* is a fascinating mix of action RPG gameplay and Roguelike dynamics. If you can handle its crude, dated graphics and the mediocre interface, I wholeheartedly recommend it. **OB**

Desktop Dungeons



QCF Design, 2010
Windows, Linux, Mac, iOS and Android

Among the many sub-genres of computer RPG, one of the most obscure is the puzzle RPG, genre that began with *Tower of the Sorcerer/*魔法の塔, a Japanese freeware title from 1994.

They look a lot like Roguelikes, having you explore a top-down dungeon with rooms, enemies and items. However, they're fully focused on resource management. Enemies are static and battles have a deterministic outcome – your goal is to carefully optimize your path, item usage, and the order of battles. If you choose poorly, you won't have enough HP left to defeat all the enemies.

A free game, *Tower of the Sorcerer* spread online and was later ported to several systems, receiving fan translations and many clones – from dozens of *RPG Maker* titles to indie games like *DROD RPG* (2008), *DungeonUp* (2014) and *Tactical Nexus* (2019).

But the game that honed the formula and brought it to the mainstream was *Desktop Dungeons*, developed by a trio of South African devs who started their careers after reading an indie game design manifesto by Edmund McMillen (creator of *Super Meat Boy*).

Most puzzle RPGs use HP, attack and defence as the main variables to be considered, resulting in a very mathematical sort of logical puzzle. *Desktop Dungeons* digs further into the RPG genre by adding features like levels, classes, races, spells and equipment. All these new variables mean that the optimal approach for an Orc Berserker will be different from that of an Elf Spy.

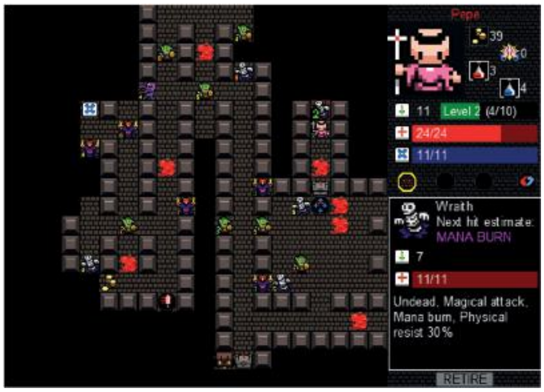
Moreover, while other games in the genre usually have fixed, fully visible maps, *DD* employs randomly-generated maps covered by a fog of war. The fog restores the player's health and mana as it is dispelled – explore too much early on and you won't be able to heal later.

Fully grasping all these systems is a challenge, but the tiny dungeons take only a few minutes to finish, making them a perfect coffee-break kind of experience.

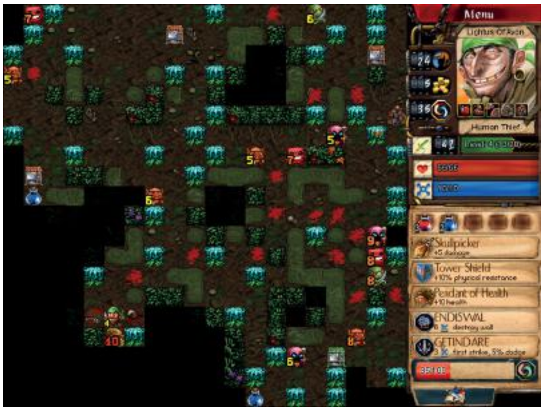
While the game's mechanical design is elegant and polished, its presentation is also a vital part of its success. The retail release combines friendly visuals and UI (evoking social media games of the era) with a great soundtrack by Danny Baranowsky and Grant Kirkhope, and leaderboards for competitively-minded players.

Desktop Dungeons looks simple, but it's one of those easy-to-play, hard-to-master titles – an indie gem with a devoted player base spending hundreds of hours trying to unlock and conquer all of its extra content. **FE**

***Desktop Dungeons* was first released in 2010 as a free alpha, then had an expanded retail version in 2013. A sequel called *Desktop Dungeons: Rewind* was announced in 2022.**

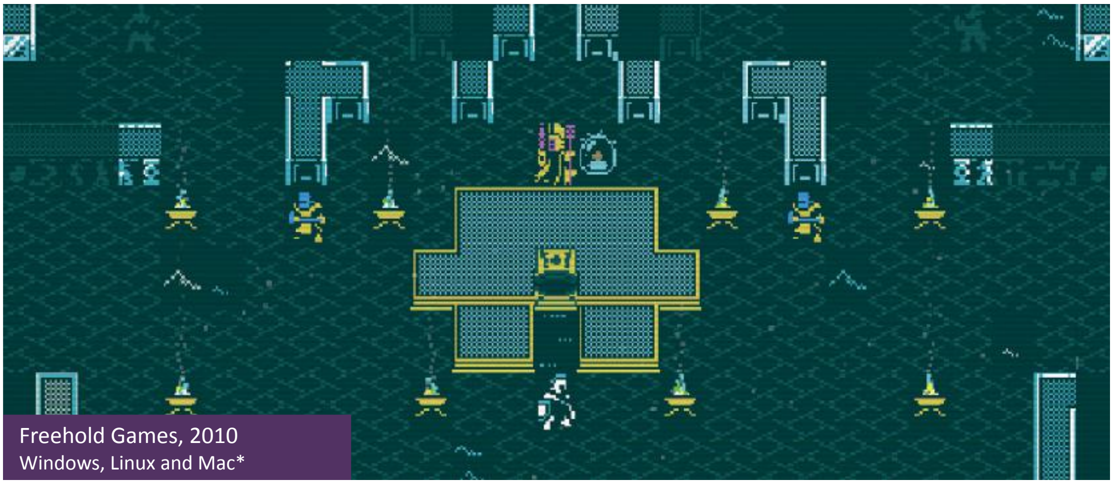


The 2010 free version has simpler graphics and few unlockables but already shows the strength of its core systems



The full retail version greatly expanded the game, adding a lot of variety inside the dungeons and a management layer in which you unlock new classes, dungeons, spells and items

Caves of Qud



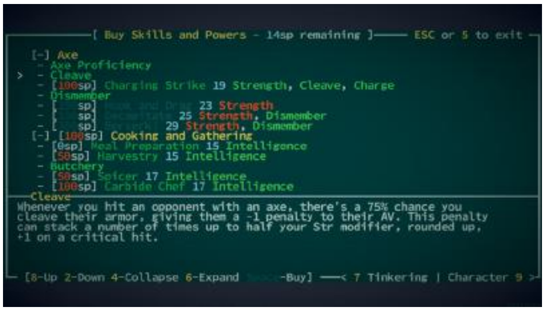
Freehold Games, 2010
Windows, Linux and Mac*

Caves of Qud is a traditional Roguelike with a significant focus on storytelling and roleplaying. The *ADOM* (1994) influence is strong, but it also shares many traits with open-world RPGs like the *Elder Scrolls* games. The world-building, heavily inspired by tabletop RPG *Gamma World* (1978), is backed up by the game's intricate systems, which create emergent narratives unique to each player.

***Caves of Qud's* development began back in 2007. It had an open beta in 2010, then was released on Steam Early Access in 2015.**

Caves of Qud's retrofuturist, science-fantasy setting is wonderful. It's a post-apocalyptic world, but its focus isn't the calamity itself. Instead, it explores what happens thousands of years after the apocalypse. Qud is an inhospitable land, yet it's filled with unique cultures. Sapient animals, plants and machines populate bazaars and churches. Swords and shields coexist with quantum technology. Ancient ruins of previous civilizations hint at what came before, but even those feel alien.

As in most Roguelikes, many elements, such as dungeon layouts, are procedurally-generated. In *Qud* that's also true for part of the world's history. This includes engravings on statues and artefacts, cultures of some villages and factions and more. The procedurally-generated writing is bizarre in a compelling way, ranging from enigmatic to hilarious.



```
——————[ Buy Skills and Powers - 14sp remaining ]———— ESC or 5 to exit
  [-] Axe
    - Axe Proficiency
>   - Cleave
    - [100sp] Charging Strike 19 Strength, Cleave, Charge
    - Dismember
    - [    sp]                23 Strength
    - [    sp]             25 Strength, Dismember
    - [    sp]           29 Strength, Dismember
  [-] [100sp] Cooking and Gathering
    - [0sp] Meal Preparation 15 Intelligence
    - [50sp] Harvestry 15 Intelligence
    - Butchery
    - [50sp] Spicer 17 Intelligence
    - [100sp] Carbide Chef 17 Intelligence
 Cleave
Whenever you hit an opponent with an axe, there's a 75% chance you
cleave their armor, giving them a -1 penalty to their AV. This penalty
can stack a number of times up to half your Str modifier, rounded up,
+1 on a critical hit.

[8-Up 2-Down 4-Collapse 6-Expand      -Buy] ——< 7 Tinkering | Character 9 >
```

As you level up, you earn points that can be used to buy new skills and abilities; mutants can also upgrade their mutations or acquire entirely new ones

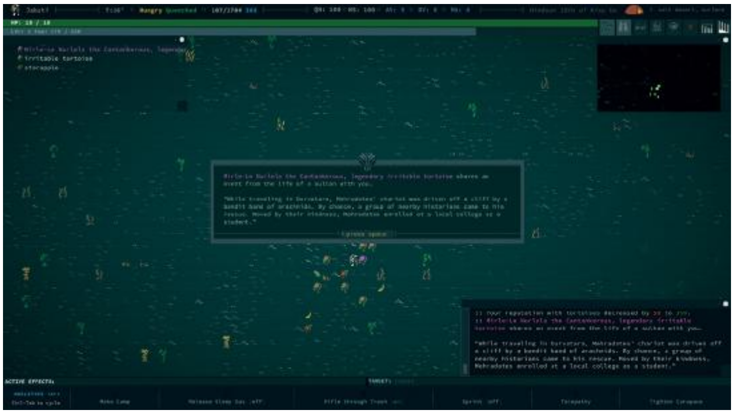
That said, the main quest relies on handcrafted prose. There are lengthy dialogue trees and evocative descriptions for the people and places you encounter. This mix of handcrafted and procedurally-generated stories lends *Qud* an air of mystery. That mystery is renewed every time you start a new character.

Character creation in *Caves of Qud* is quite elaborate and a great tool for player expression. There are attributes similar to those in *Dungeons & Dragons* and an extensive skill system that covers combat, survival, diplomacy and crafting. There are also unconventional classes, with options like Water Merchant and Horticulturist. But the most impactful choice is whether to play as a Mutant or a True Kin.

Mutants gain physical and mental mutations such as wings, multiple arms, or telepathy. Each costs a certain number of points, but by adding defects, like brittle bones or narcolepsy, you get points back. Mutations can often be used both in and out of combat. The Electric Discharge mutation deals damage but can also recharge electronic devices, so crafters can make good use of it. Some can also be combined for powerful effects. Mixing multiple legs, spinnerets and phasing gets you a spider-like character who can walk through walls and trap foes in the astral plane with webs.

True Kin are more straightforward. They rely on cybernetic implants like mechanical limbs and neural microchips. You choose a single implant when creating your character and find more hidden in random locations. This diminishes the uniqueness of True Kin characters during the early game, but both options have many unconventional approaches available to them. Coming up with different build strategies after a character dies is very rewarding. And it's good that character creation is so engaging because *Caves of Qud* will kill you often.

> "For world-building: history is #1. A setting's resonance is really a function of how it distorts real history in authentic ways. If you want to write for an ancient world with kings/queens, empires, re-purposed ruins, etc., you really should read all the great literature on Rome."
>
> *– Jason Grinblat,*
> *Caves of Qud's Co-Creator*



The world's lore is just as valuable as its water and artefacts, as secrets can be traded to improve your reputation, learn new recipes or uncover important locations

Combat can get pretty hectic and it pays to always have a means of escape in case things go south. Major dungeons have specific mechanics that, while well-designed, are deadly if you're not well-prepared. *Caves of Qud* has a steep learning curve, but it values a good plan more than raw numbers. It never requires you to only play optimised characters. The early stages of the main quest can get a bit repetitive, due to permadeath, but thanks to the build variety and the procedural generation, it remains very compelling.

For those looking for an easier time, there's a roleplay mode, which lets you respawn at settlements, and a "wander" mode, which makes most enemies non-aggressive. The controls are also user-friendly, with recent versions adding context-sensitive buttons and mouse support. By removing those barriers of entry, the game opened itself to a wider range of players.

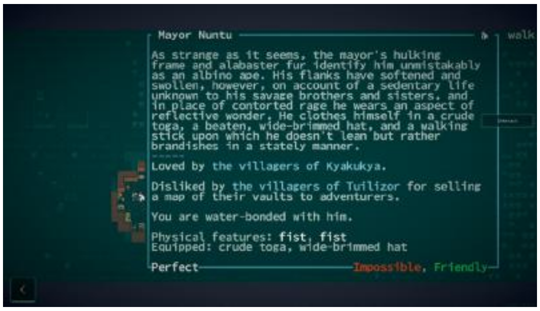
Slowly mastering *Qud*'s mechanics is fun because even mistakes can transform your playthroughs in unique ways. For example, mushroom spores might infect you with the "mumble mouth" ailment. This takes away an equipment slot, covering it in mouths that tell you secrets about the land, like rare item locations. These secrets can be used in diplomacy and exchanged for certain favours. However, fungi-hating factions might become hostile to you.

If you want a cure, you'll have to track down the recipe and its ingredients. Or you can cut off the infected limb and find a way to grow it back. *Caves of Qud*'s interwoven systems create many different challenges with numerous solutions.

Take the game's economy and inventory systems, which are elegantly tied to its narrative. Water is both the currency of *Qud* and important for survival, as dehydration is lethal. It's a major factor in diplomacy, as you can share it with NPCs in rituals that affect your reputation. But water is also heavy and you can only carry so much. At times this can get a bit tedious. But it allows the inventiveness of the player to shine, and finding ways to circumvent challenges is very gratifying.

Some may not appreciate the game's simple visuals. But its minimalist sprites, reminiscent of ASCII art but easier to parse, are quite charming. As for the music, Craig Hamilton's soundtrack is as eccentric as the game's setting and complements it beautifully.

Caves of Qud is a triumph. Its complex gameplay systems work hand-in-hand with the narrative, creating a world that feels alive. From character creation to the end of the main quest, player expression is encouraged and rewarded. Traditional Roguelikes can be hard to get into, but *Caves of Qud* is a fantastic entry point into the genre and one of the best experiences it has to offer. **LMM**



```
Mayor Nuntu
As strange as it seems, the mayor's hulking
frame and alabaster fur identify him unmistakably
as an albino ape. His flanks have softened and
swollen, however, on account of a sedentary life
unknown to his savage brothers and sisters, and
in place of contorted rage he wears an aspect of
reflective wonder. He clothes himself in a crude
toga, a beaten, wide-brimmed hat, and a walking
stick upon which he doesn't lean but rather
brandishes in a stately manner.

Loved by the villagers of Kyakukya.

Disliked by the villagers of Tuilizor for selling
a map of their vaults to adventurers.

You are water-bonded with him.

Physical features: fist, fist
Equipped: crude toga, wide-brimmed hat

Perfect                              Impossible, Friendly
```

Enemies have skills and factions; some will also have their own backstories, part of the procedurally-generated world history

Mods:

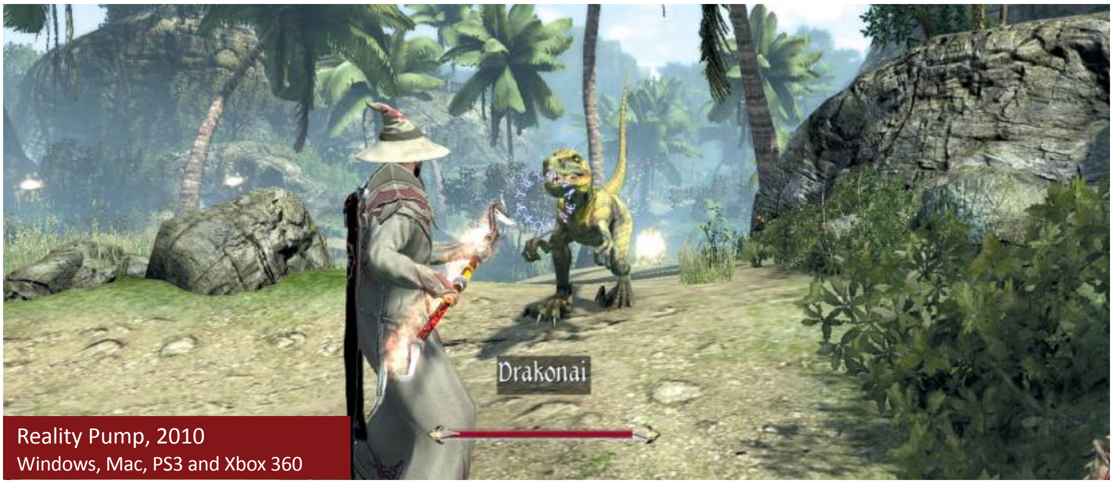
The Qud Survival Guide: A lore-friendly in-game tutorial designed to acclimatise new players to the early game.

Hearthpyre: Lets you build settlements, customise them with furniture and have NPCs inhabit them.

QudUX: Makes finding quest-givers easier, lets you customise your sprite and adds quality-of-life changes to the UI.

Clever Girl: Expands the functionality of follower NPCs, giving you control over their gear and skills.

Two Worlds II



Reality Pump, 2010
Windows, Mac, PS3 and Xbox 360

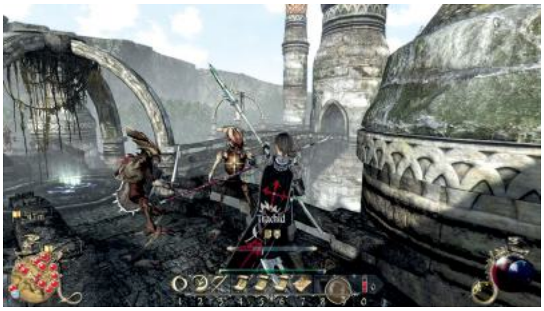
Two Worlds II can sometimes refuse to launch depending on your PhysX driver. If you're having any issues, install Nvidia's PhysX legacy driver.

The first *Two Worlds (2007)* wasn't a critical hit, but some fans enjoyed having an alternative to *Oblivion* and *Gothic 3* in open-world RPGs. Its multiple factions, huge world, classless character system, Old English dialogues and Polish origins gave it a distinctive flair, even if the game wasn't great.

An expansion named *Two Worlds: The Temptation* was announced, but after years of delays it became a full sequel – awkwardly titled *Two Worlds II*. While at a glance it looks like the first game, a lot was changed.

The Old English writing was abandoned, as the hero now sports a deadpan attitude, with occasional snide remarks, self-aware jokes and bizarre situations adding humour. Graphics have been greatly upgraded, displaying flowing hair and cloaks, dense vegetation, reflections and object physics with such prominence that it seems like a tech demo sometimes.

While *Two Worlds II* is an open-world RPG, its world isn't very big and progression is often gated. There's a small introductory island, a large continent dominated by savannah and Middle Eastern-type towns, a second continent with a Japanese-inspired city surrounded by tropical jungles, and a third continent that appears as a huge landmass on the map, but actually has quite small playable areas.



Two Worlds II combat is solid, but its console focus limits the number of abilities on the action bar to only three at a time

While there are several side-quests, the game itself isn't very lengthy – a completionist can likely see everything in 30–40 hours. Instead, the real draw of *Two Worlds II* is the diversity of things to do.

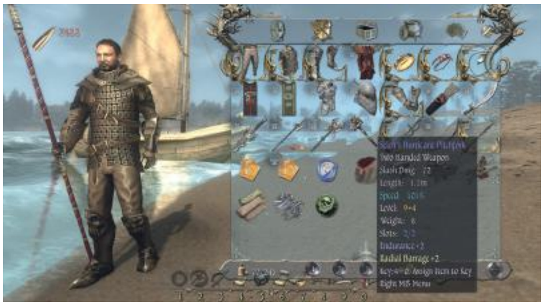
The game is a real-time action RPG, with a classless character system offering the usual Fighter/Mage/Thief abilities, plus a few non-combat skills. Combat is rather clunky but gets the job done, and the physics engine makes hits feel satisfying.

During your journey you'll create new spells, race horses, sail a boat, upgrade weapons and armour, dye your clothing, join guilds, battle in arenas, explore dungeons, play songs, mine, gamble, pick locks, pick pockets, set traps, etc. It's a feature list that rivals some of the best open-world RPGs, but packed into a much shorter and faster-moving game.

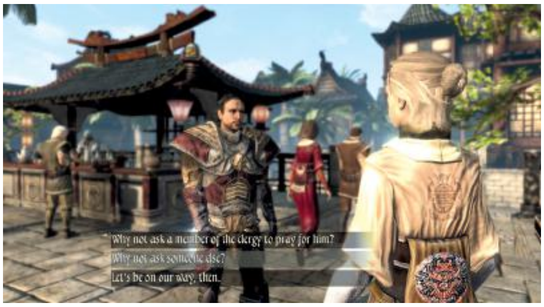
Among these features, the magic system stands out. *Two Worlds II* requires you to create all your spells by combining magic cards. You mix an effect card (Fire, Water, Life, Force, Thorns, etc.) with a carrier card (Missile, Area Effect, Summon, Totem, etc.) and then add modifier cards (Time, Damage, Defence, Homing, etc.). Depending on your level, you can stack several of these to strengthen their effect, or even make spells with two or three different phases.

For example, you mix Fire and Missile to make a Firebolt. Then you can add a modifier to make it split into more missiles and/or ricochet between enemies, plus add the Corpse card with the Enchant carrier to hold enemies still for four seconds after being hit.

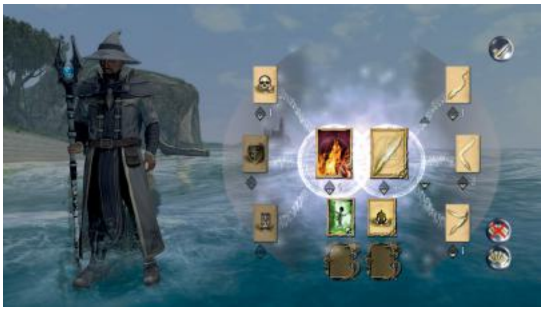
It's an extremely interesting system, with all sorts of novel powers like resurrecting yourself or creating altars you can later instantly activate to heal or buff. And it ties well to the character progression, as buying more cards and levelling up your skill to mix more of them into a single spell is quite rewarding.



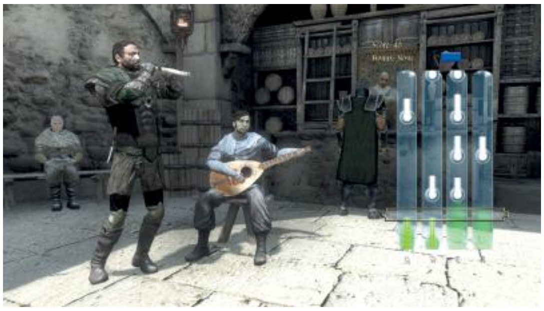
You can dismantle your gear, then use the materials to upgrade equipment, dye it and socket magical gems


Why not ask a member of the clergy to pray for him?
Why not ask someone else?
Let's be on our way, then.

Dialogue is very simple, with few choices besides asking for exposition and refusing side-quests, but it's often funny



You can mix effects, carriers and modifiers to create your own spells, from walking on water to ricocheting fireballs



There are numerous activities, such as a *Guitar Hero* rip-off, sailing, playing dice, horse racing and building a village

There are other good ideas, but poor design choices end up diminishing them. The game has a classless character system that promotes spreading your skills, but requires wielding a staff when casting spells and forbids you from using bows with heavy armour or robes, limiting your gameplay options.

Similarly, equipment is mostly restricted by level, limiting your effective choices to your current level tier, as it will deal a lot more damage than the previous tier (an issue *Two Worlds I* also had).

That's not to mention odd choices like having dungeon maps always fully revealed or how enemies are all displayed on the mini-map, even "hidden" ones. The game even promotes glaring AI faults: a loading screen tip is to climb on rocks, so that melee enemies can't find a way to reach you and just stand still.

However, the worst sin of *Two Worlds II* is how many of its novel features are criminally underused. You can sail a boat, manually positioning the boom to harness the wind, but there are few places to sail to. You get a horse, but can only use it on the first continent. You can dye armour, but there are few colours and you can only dye certain parts of it. You can make spells to jump higher or walk on water, but there's little reason to use them. You can sneak, steal and assassinate, but that's rarely useful. Luckily, mods like *Worldmerge* manage to salvage much of that, adding content to better explore those features.

Multiplayer is also extensive. There's a separate co-op mode with a linear and combat-heavy 10-hour campaign set sometime between *Two Worlds I* and *II*, plus modes like Deathmatch, Duel, Crystal, Capture, Defend the Throne and even a Village mode, in which you build farms, mills, forges, guardhouses, shops and the like, occasionally defending them from monsters. It's all very simplistic, but nice to have nonetheless.

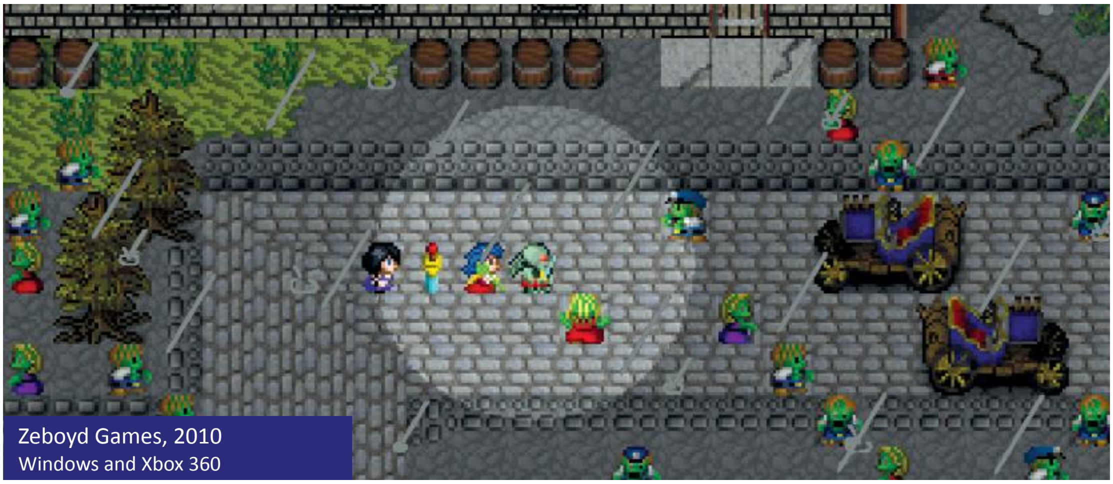
Two Worlds II's charm comes from this contrast. It's extremely ambitious, but, while it lacks depth, the constant stream of new things to do leads to an addictive experience, always asking "what's next?" It's not a game for everyone, but those willing to endure some roughness and limitations will certainly find themselves entertained for many hours. **FE**

Two Worlds II **was surrounded by controversy, selling the 2017 expansion** ***Call of the Tenebrae*****, which was previously promised as a free update, and disabling the game's console commands in order to sell micro-transactions.**

Mods:

Worldmerge: The ultimate mod pack for *Two Worlds II*, it fuses the main campaign, the *Pirates of the Flying Fortress* expansion and the multiplayer maps into a single world, with three new difficulty settings. It also adds better AI, tougher combat, hidden secrets to pursue, expanded character creation, more armour colouring options, the ability to cast spells with any weapon and use bows with any armour, increased draw distance, killable NPCs, new weapons, armour, quests, boss enemies and much more. Highly recommended, even for a first playthrough.

Cthulhu Saves the World

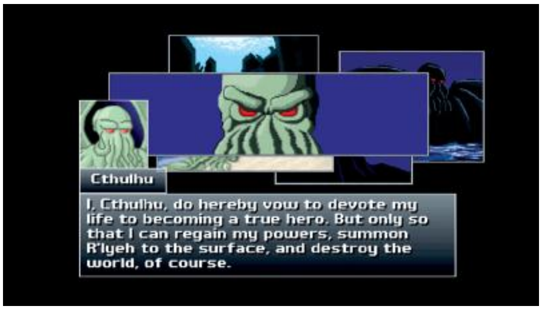


Zeboyd Games, 2010
Windows and Xbox 360

In 2010 Zeboyd Games released *Breath of Death VII: The Beginning* and *Cthulhu Saves the World*, two of the first indie RPGs on Xbox Live. They then ran a Kickstarter to fund an enhanced PC port of *Cthulhu*, released in 2011.

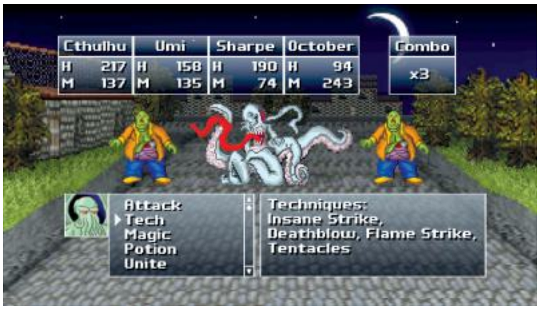
Cthulhu Saves the World is a small and linear but content-rich RPG, put out by the prolific Robert Boyd and Bill Stiernberg duo at Zeboyd. The game is mostly notable for its retro aesthetics and hilarious take on the Cthulhu mythos.

In terms of structure and gameplay, *Cthulhu Saves the World* is a straightforward JRPG. Where the game shines – the reasons it is worthwhile to talk about at all – are its plot, its characters and the obvious love that the developers had for both. You begin the game as Cthulhu, the Old One, being deprived of your powers by an unknown force. In order to regain them, you must first become a true hero – only then may you resume your plans to destroy the world. It's a well-constructed and humorous story that most fans of Lovecraft should be able to appreciate.



I, Cthulhu, do hereby vow to devote my life to becoming a true hero. But only so that I can regain my powers, summon R'lyeh to the surface, and destroy the world, of course.

The game takes elements from various classic JRPGs, such as the multi-panel cutscenes from the *Phantasy Star* series



Combat is the usual JRPG fare, but with a few twists: for example, each round the enemies get 10% stronger, forcing you to kill quickly

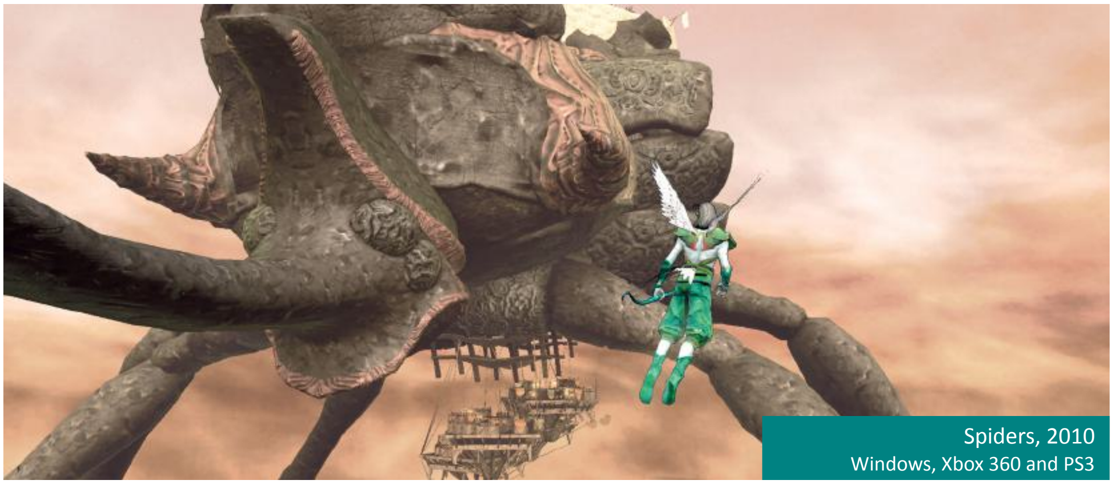
Ironically, however, the game's characters are also the game's biggest weakness. While you never get tired of Cthulhu cast in the role of "grumpy and unwilling saviour", or some of his tag-along friends and the sharp developer wit their personalities exhibit, other characters are downright obnoxious and unnecessary. Your first companion, Umi, is a tiresome groupie whose shtick gets old really fast. Other characters like the necromancer (October), the sword (Sharpe) or the cat alien (Paws) are much more interesting and switch between parodying tropes of the genre and being cool characters in their own right.

As a game, *Cthulhu Saves the World* is a sufficient but forgettable experience. You walk across a fairly linear overworld or map with your band of ragtag saviours, collecting items and fighting battles, both random and hand-placed. The battle screen takes you to the standard JRPG line-up, in which enemies and player characters stare each other down face-to-face, taking turns to inflict damage upon each other.

You might think the game is bad or bogged down from my choice of words. This, however, is not the case. *Cthulhu*'s characters and enemies are varied and you have plenty of different tactical options at your disposal, thanks in part to a clever progression system that offers a choice between different skills and stats bonuses at each level-up.

Ultimately, *Cthulhu Saves the World* is more than enough fun to justify the measly two dollars being asked for the game on Steam these days. It is one of those rare games, like the original *Doom*, in which playing it gives you a sense of who its developers were, what they enjoyed, which time they were raised in, and which culture produced them. For this reason alone, the game is worth a glance from any would-be RPG connoisseurs. **CG**

Faery: Legends of Avalon



Spiders, 2010
Windows, Xbox 360 and PS3

Middle-of-the-road games have a certain kind of difficulty attached to them when it comes to writing reviews. Calling them bad is disingenuous while lauding certain quirky aspects can sound like undeserving praise. *Faery: Legends of Avalon* is the quintessential example of this.

The game can best be described as a JRPG-lite about adventures in the fairy realm. There are plenty of generic elements that, while not exciting, are easily digestible: you'll engage in quests and dialogues with binary good/evil paths, meet a few new companions, collect simplistic gear and fight in straightforward turn-based JRPG-like battles. But the how and why is not of importance, but rather the where.

The plot revolves around an ever-increasing cast of magical beings that goes journeying in curious places – the World-Tree Nordrassil, the haunted Flying Dutchman, an Arabic city on top of a giant beetle and, of course, the titular Avalon. On top of all of this, there is a simple feature which adds tremendously to the exploration aspect: flying.

Being an enchanted fairy has its perks; one of them is being able to travel on wings across the land. There is a primal kinetic delight to zig-zagging left and right while going about your questing and combat. Given how much of the time is spent going from point A to B in RPGs, you would think more thought would be given to making it more interesting. *Faery: Legends of Avalon* is one of the few games that actually tries to change this vital part, and succeeds.

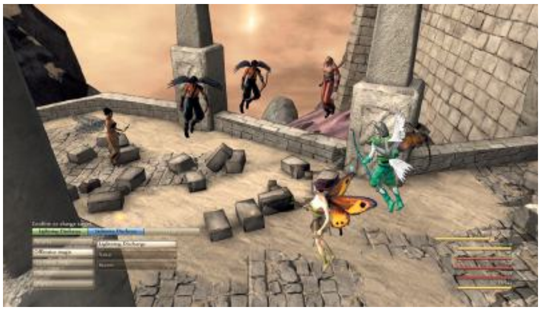
The only other feature worth mentioning is the visual aspect of the game's progression system. When the main character gains a level, they must choose between exclusive spells and abilities, each with different visual representations – horns, wings, tattoos, tails, auras, etc.

Thus the player might have a cat's tail, dragonfly wings and antennae on one playthrough, but look entirely different in the next, adding a lot of personality.

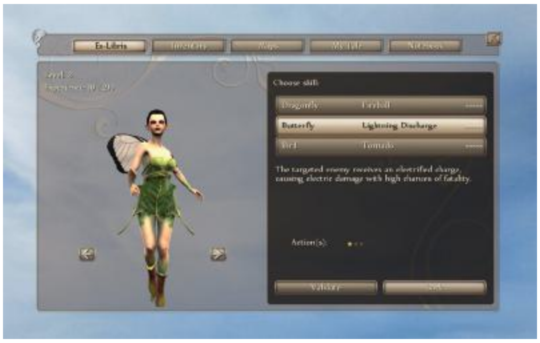
The fact that *Faery* stands out so much reflects horribly on games. Mystery is one of the driving forces of fiction and the fact this title impresses so much in that department just shows how saturated with Tolkien-esque fantasy the industry is. But even in a world of gaming with endlessly diverse settings, I would still recommend *Faery*, even for a short while, just for its flying and visual level-up representation.

In the end, *Faery: Legends of Avalon* is a simple 6–8 hour game that shows players something new, and that's already more than can be said of some RPGs that are ten times as long. **LL**

Spiders was founded in 2008 by a group of French developers who worked together on *Silverfall* (2007), a hack-and-slash RPG.



Combat is clearly based on JRPGs, and extremely simple: you just need to learn when to use physical attacks or spells

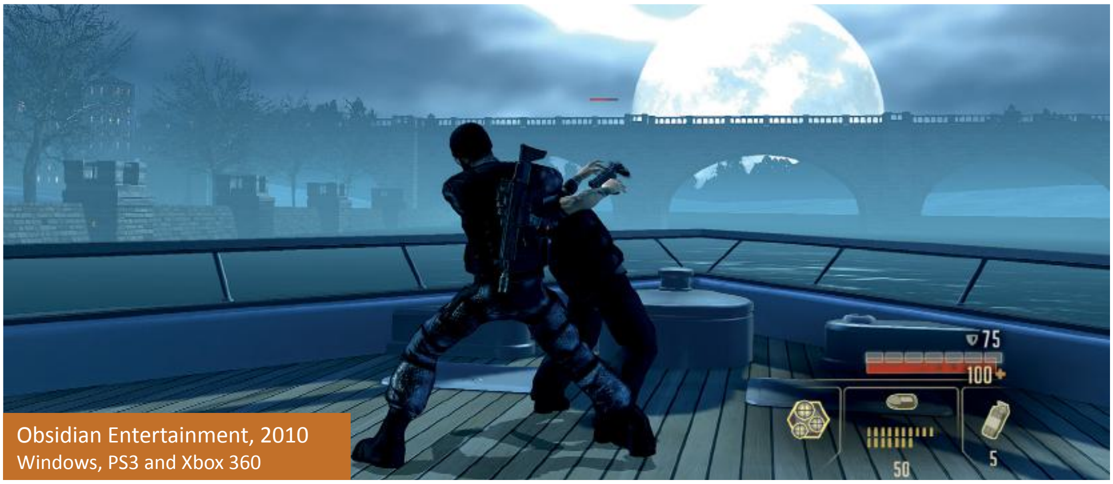


The targeted enemy receives an electrified charge, causing electric damage with high chances of fatality.

Your choice of skills also changes your appearance, such as the type of magic you pick deciding what kind of wings your character will have

Alpha Protocol:

The Espionage RPG



Obsidian Entertainment, 2010
Windows, PS3 and Xbox 360

I should clarify right at the beginning that, in my opinion, Obsidian Entertainment's *Alpha Protocol* is one of the most underappreciated action RPGs of all time. Sure, the game has numerous faults, so it is not entirely Game of the Year material, but it also has several important and well-developed elements in which it surpasses the competition.

Alpha Protocol was ready for a 2009 release, but its publisher, SEGA, imposed a delay to build up hype. The plan backfired, as _AP_ was released right after _Mass Effect 2_ and _Splinter Cell: Conviction_, leading to harsh comparisons and slow sales.

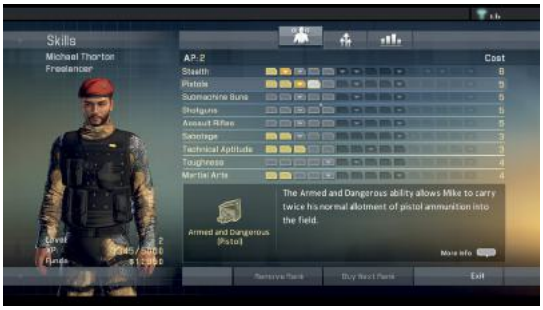
As you can see from the subtitle, *Alpha Protocol* invites you into the world of espionage, where you encounter top-secret organisations, terrorists, rogue spies, gadgets right out of a James Bond movie and, of course, a secret agent who will save the day. The hero I'm talking about is Michael Thorton, a new recruit to Alpha Protocol, a super-secret organisation in the United States.

After a brief introduction, you will start your career with an easy tutorial, followed by your first real assignment: travelling to Saudi Arabia to find and deal with an international terrorist. Of course, this is just the beginning, and soon you will figure out things are not as they appear. After a few missions, you will run for your life, with half of the American government breathing down on your neck, not to mention the Russian mafia and some bad guys from China.

If you like the political thrillers of Tom Clancy, or the hit TV show *24*, you will feel right at home in the world of *Alpha Protocol*, and you won't be disappointed by the events depicted in the game.

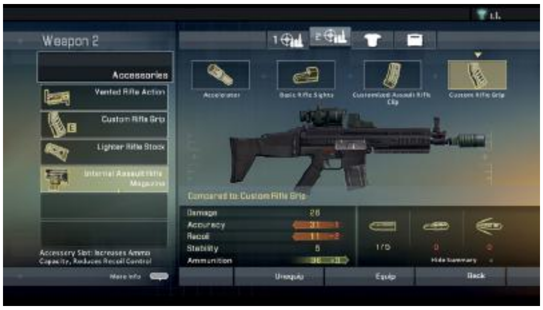
Obviously a good story cannot exist without good characters, and Obsidian pulls this off quite well. Michael Thorton is not a predefined character; it's up to players to decide what kind of person he is. An important tool for this is the dialogue system, which at first sight is very similar to the dialogue wheels used in other RPGs. However, you won't choose what you want to say, but in what manner you want to reply. This way, Thorton can be aggressive, professional or suave – the three agent archetypes, Jack Bauer, Jason Bourne and James Bond – plus a few other choices, depending on the context. There is a short time limit for choosing, which gives dialogues a nice, natural flow.

Your decisions, your replies and the intel gathered all have consequences (some bigger, some smaller), to a degree that few other games ever could match, which in itself warrants several playthroughs. You can even choose how to approach missions, such as trying to infiltrate an airbase right at the start or going after a local weapons dealer for intel first.


Skills
Michael Thorton
Freelancer
AP: 2
Cost
Stealth
Pistols
Submachine Guns
Shotguns
Assault Rifles
Sabotage
Technical Aptitude
Toughness
Martial Arts
Armed and Dangerous (Pistol)
Level
XP
Funds
More info
Exit

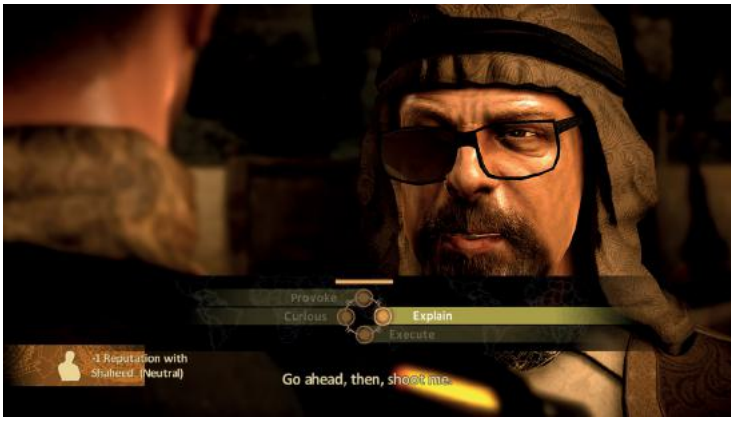
The Armed and Dangerous ability allows Mike to carry twice his normal allotment of pistol ammunition into the field.

As you level up, you'll gain points that can be spent to gain passive buffs or learn new skills and abilities


Weapon 2
Accessories
Vented Rifle Action
Custom Rifle Grip
Lighter Rifle Stock
Damage
Accuracy
Recoil
Stability
Ammunition
More info
Unequip
Equip
Back

Weapons and gear are customisable in a variety of ways, thanks to upgrades that can be found or purchased

> “The story is gameplay – the alliances/enemies you make in the game affect missions, respect, endgame choices, reactivity and also special perks for your character. Interaction with a character in the game is a game system and gameplay in itself, which was our goal. We didn’t want the story or dialogue to be divorced from the missions or gameplay.”
>
> *– Chris Avellone,*
> Alpha Protocol*’s lead designer*


Provoke
Curious
Explain
Execute
-1 Reputation with Shaheed (Neutral)
Go ahead, then, shoot me.

You have a time limit to choose between the various dialogue options, and they will all have long-term consequences

There are several memorable NPCs in the game, although, because the story is grounded in reality, they are not as far-fetched as in games like *Planescape: Torment*. I have to point out Steven Heck, who must be applauded as one of the most memorable characters in gaming. Every minute the player spends with this psychopathic rogue agent is comedy gold. Just don’t be surprised if the guy ties up the hostages, pours some fuel on them and finally sets them on fire.

However, not everything is good, thanks to some problems within the game mechanics. By default, the game is a third-person shooter, mixed up with *Deus Ex* influences and fairly hectic cover mechanics. You can sneak around, evade cameras and knock out unalert guards, or just draw your weapons and gun everyone down. Being an RPG, *Alpha Protocol* also has a nice (although shallow) character progression system, which lets the player upgrade Thorton’s skills (weapons, martial arts, technical affinity, etc.), as well as offering unique passive perks that are unlocked based on your choices, actions and playstyle.

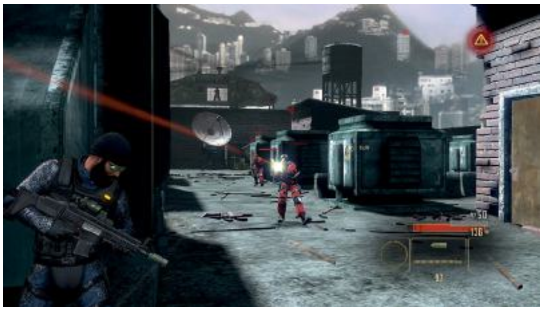
The problem is that some of these abilities are useless, while others are overpowered. For example, using a Stealth skill that briefly turns you invisible together with the Chain Shot skill allows players to easily finish off anybody, even bosses.

Sadly, the game has some shortcomings in the technical department as well. The controls were clearly designed with controllers in mind, which makes the camera movement with a mouse pretty frustrating sometimes. It also has some texture streaming and AI problems, and lacks some overall polish, with players complaining about several minor bugs.

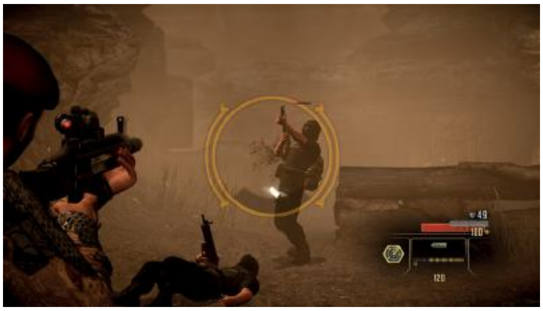
The mini-games are a controversial point, since people are divided over whether or not they are designed well. I personally feel that they are among the best of their kind, because they require actual concentration, and hand-eye coordination, and are not focused on quick time events or trivial puzzles. During hacking, you have to find matching lines of code in a running matrix. To disable an electric circuit, you must solve a visual maze. And to pick a lock, you have to manually move the pins of the lock. It is true that, because of the jerky mouse controls, these can become somewhat difficult, but, once you get used to how they work, they are quite manageable. And if you get stuck, they can be bypassed with a few EMP grenades.

With all that said, who is this game for? Well, if you value good stories, like to experience the consequences of your choices and love conspiracies, then give *Alpha Protocol* a shot. You might find a rough diamond under the technical difficulties. **JC**

Chris Avellone revealed in a 2013 interview that his plans for a sequel involved a wackier tone, similar to *Kill Bill* and the *Saints Row* games, while also featuring an asynchronous multiplayer element, inspired by *Dark Souls.* However, due to poor sales, SEGA has no interest in a sequel.



The cover mechanics are serviceable, but will occasionally give players a hard time, likely forcing a reload



The longer you keep your aim reticule over the target, the higher your accuracy and the critical hit chance

Fallout: New Vegas

Obsidian Entertainment, 2010
Windows, PS3 and Xbox 360

People will never stop bickering over whether *Fallout 3* is better than *New Vegas*, and I love that. It's a sign of prosperous times, really. After all they're both excellent games that came out within two years of each other, they both spin the same idea and same franchise to cater to specific tastes, and they both provide some of the most satisfying long-term gameplay in the genre. Plus, that debate always reminds me that *New Vegas* actually exists, which makes me far too giddy to get bitter about anything. Because, while I think *Fallout 3* is one of the better RPGs of this generation, I think *Fallout: New Vegas* is the very best game of its generation!

Part of the team that worked on *New Vegas* had worked on *Van Burren,* Interplay's cancelled third *Fallout.* Many ideas from that game were salvaged, including Caesar's Legion, the Hoover Dam battle and the Burned Man.

I don't even have to question myself. Out of an entire console generation of RPGs, *Fallout: New Vegas* has the highest standards in choices and consequences, world-building that is most relevant to gameplay, the funniest and most thoughtful writing, the most impactful levelling and character progression, the most pleasing tone and atmosphere. The list goes on.

It's a dream-team collaboration between Bethesda's tech (a massively detailed open-ended world with a meticulous level of player interaction) and Obsidian's writing (a complicated interactive political drama) that combined the best qualities of the best modern RPGs.

ITEMS
STATS
ITEMS
DATA

A vast amount of content and many usable items create a satisfying, complicated RPG

And it certainly also helped that the Mojave Wasteland presented in *Fallout: New Vegas* was more contemporary, mature and bold. It evoked more *Game of Thrones* than *Road Warrior*.

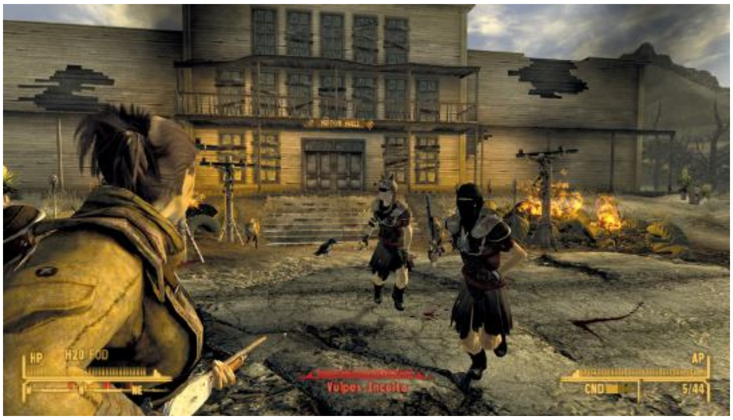
The Mojave Wasteland wasn't really a wasteland. The people around New Vegas have schools, jobs, clean water, food, clinics and a few functioning governments, whose conflicts drive the action of the story. New Vegas itself is a vacation spot for wealthy retired folks coming in from out of state, and that doesn't feel post-apocalyptic.

Your character isn't a lone scavenger grasping for survival; he's a gainfully employed courier trying to make a delivery. This desert wasteland is covered in power lines and plumbing pipelines, farms and busy trade routes. The nonsensical fantasy of *Fallout 3* was turned into a fully detailed economy for *New Vegas*, and the productivity of its economy gives actual stakes to the factions vying over it.

Faction play is the star of the show, really. There is an overwhelming number of possible ways for each faction to intersect in and out of each other's storylines in different ways. Faction quests criss-cross into other faction quests; the order in which you take them can affect your possibility of taking others; the motivations and narrative wrappers surrounding those quests always relate to the complexities of the world's economy. The three biggest factions at play all fight with a reasonable and realistic amount of self-interest. You can see where they're coming from. Even Caesar's Legion, who have to be the villains.

And what great villains they are! Caesar's Legion has an ever-expanding medieval empire that revels in slavery, torture, sadism and warfare. And what makes them truly terrifying is that they aren't moustache-twirlers.

> “I guess the thing is, I don’t really view RPG and FPS as separate genres. FPS is the style of combat that the game has outside of VATS. But the RPG always influences how you use that combat system, whether it’s in VATS or in first-person real-time.”
>
> – *Josh Sawyer,*
> New Vegas*’ lead designer*



With VATS, the player can cripple specific body parts, damage enemy weapons or shoot unexploded grenades

Fallout: New Vegas is a game about economics, after all, so Caesar’s Legion aren’t evil simply because they enjoy being evil, but rather because they have created a fairly successful war economy that requires them to be evil. It requires them to systematise evil as banality.

They rationalise the horrible things they do with economics, victim-blaming and their sneering superiority complex. If you lose track of your moral compass, you could easily get talked into seeing things their way. They are terrifying videogame villains because they don’t resemble videogame villains. They resemble villains from real life. And that really is horrifying.

Outside of their torchlit war camps is a vast American desert full of singing cowboys, lounge lizards, mutated hulks and leather-clad anarchists who have a vast number of stories to tell. The Mojave Wasteland is built as a narrative-framing device for its short stories, little *Twilight Zone* side-quests that highlight strange and wonderful episodes before the three-part series finale of the main quest.

That’s how I was able to squeeze a gratifying 250 hours (that were rarely boring!) out of the game; there’s simply an insane number of enjoyably self-contained stories to be found in the side-quests.

I want to discuss other things.
Let's keep moving

Travelling with certain companions may tear apart your faction allegiances, if you choose to recruit them

You can see this same episodic storytelling happening in the DLCs as well. As one of the few games of its generation to do DLC right, *New Vegas* sold four story add-ons that were each like a mini expansion pack, adding in a good chunk of extra content while also exploring a new story in this universe that had something interesting to tell. And screw the haters, *Dead Money* was the best one!

Fascinating stories, meaningful choices and a thoughtful awareness of its world are baked into nearly every element of this game, and for those reasons it is my favourite game of its generation. These are the reasons why *Fallout: New Vegas* is one of the best FPS-RPGs of all time, and deserves to be as highly regarded as *Deus Ex* and *System Shock 2*. **GW**

Mods:

The New Vegas reddit has a handy mod guide that includes all must-have mods, such as bug fixes and optional visual changes. Here’s a few extra ones:

JSawyer: Created by the game’s own lead designer, this mod makes the game harder with various tweaks, such as harsher survival conditions, less HP, lower level cap and adding weight to stimpacks.

Project Nevada: Made by *Fallout 3: Wanderer’s Edition*’s team, it’s a huge mod that adds many new features and content, and changes to the balancing.

Fallout - Project Brazil: Offers a whole new campaign, in which a civil war erupts inside your vault.

Autumn Leaves: A professionally made new quest in which you’ll have to solve an exotic murder mystery.

Fallout - The Frontier: A huge fan-made expansion that adds a large new map, working vehicles, new enemies and bold new mechanics. Includes three story paths.

Brave New World: Re-voices 145 NPCs with new voice actors, bringing a lot more variety to the world.

Mass Effect 2

BioWare, 2010
Windows, Xbox 360 and PS3

Garrus: Just like old times, Shepard.
N7

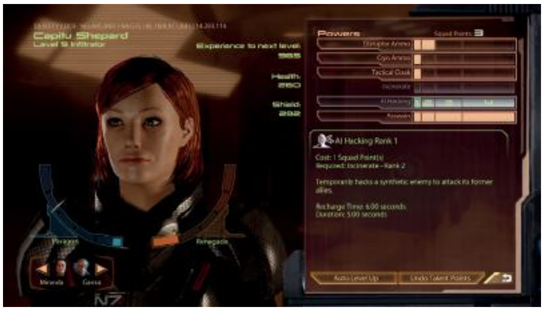
The original *Mass Effect* was both a critical and a commercial success, and the BioWare team had three years to polish the sequel. *Mass Effect 2* ended up selling more copies and winning more awards (Metacritic 89 vs. 94), so both BioWare and Electronic Arts were surely happy. But is it really a better RPG? My answer would be no.

A better game? Possibly. It's a paradoxical game, which suffers from what seems to be executive meddling and a design-by-committee approach.

The best element to showcase this schizophrenia is the writing. The main plot ranks among the worst videogame plots in existence – it starts with Shepard getting killed, then resurrected and forced to work for a terrorist organisation, gathering allies and resources for a special mission. Its flaws are too many to list here and I recommend readers to check the excellent dissection by Shamus Young (see left).

Writer Shamus Young produced an extensive and detailed analysis of the *Mass Effect* trilogy's story and world-building, especially the changes from *ME1* to *ME2*. It can be found on his website: www.shamusyoung.com.

However, the companions and their recruitment and loyalty missions, which form the majority of the content, are some of BioWare's best. While the companions themselves are hardly unique and suffer from the "sexier and edgier" treatment, they are mostly well-written, and the quests, first to recruit them and later to ensure their loyalty, are excellent.


Character-building has been changed. dialogue and non-combat skills have been removed, but new powers can be learned from your companions

Experience to next level
Health
Shield
Powers
Squad Points
Disruptor Ammo
Cryo Ammo
Tactical Cloak
Incinerate
AI Hacking
AI Hacking Rank 1
Cost: 1 Squad Point(s)
Required: Incinerate – Rank 2
Temporarily hacks a synthetic enemy to attack its former allies.
Recharge Time: 6.00 seconds
Duration: 5.00 seconds
Paragon
Renegade
Miranda
Garrus
Auto Level Up
Undo Talent Points
N7

More races of the galaxy are represented in the team than in the first *Mass Effect*, and through the companion stories the surrounding world is expanded. Unfortunately, the encyclopaedia from the first game still exists and is utilised as a crutch by the writers – however, it's unnecessary to actually consult it, as all the information that the player needs is conveyed by the companions.

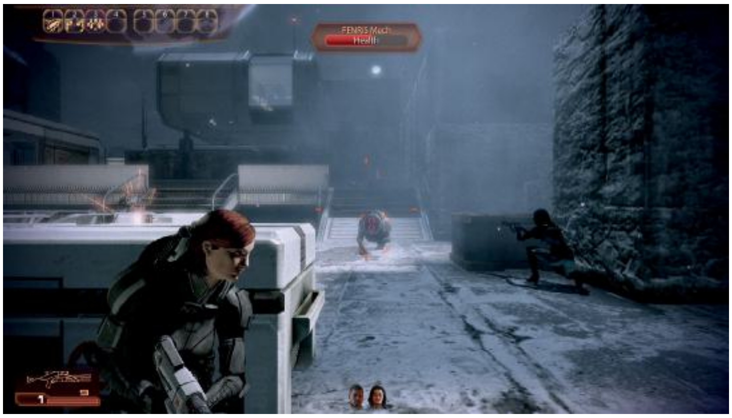
Technically, the sequel has not made any notable changes. To this day, the game still looks and sounds good, though it is fairly obvious that the levels are small and the obvious waist-high walls are always a clear signpost that combat is about to start.

Which brings me to *Mass Effect 2*'s big change: mechanically, the game has been turned into a cover shooter, similar to *Gears of War*. It's a puzzling change, as mechanically there was nothing wrong with the combat in the original. It doesn't work too well with the special powers either, as aiming them is somewhat cumbersome with this new, stiff camera.

To further reinforce the similarities to shooters, the overheating mechanism is gone – we're back to the safety of magazine reloads. Naturally, this change required a nonsensical retcon of existing lore and it really serves no purpose, as bullets are so liberally spread around that there is absolutely no danger of ever running dry, not even if you are a soldier and thus use guns for every encounter.

The special abilities of various classes and their skill trees have also been overhauled. They weren't that interesting in the original and now they are largely meaningless. Every encounter can be completed with any squad composition, as your teammates are largely useless, thus levels had to be designed to accommodate every class that Shepard could be – a similar issue plagued *Neverwinter Nights*.

> “We’re really highlighting the shooter aspect of it. We haven’t actually taken away any of the RPG systems, but we want to package it so that everything is a little bit more intuitive, more streamlined, and overall the experience is like, ‘Ah, I played through this incredible story’. A typical BioWare story. But how we played through it felt much smoother.”
>
> *– Adrien Cho,*
> Mass Effect 2*’s lead producer*



Mass Effect 2 revamps the combat system, now focusing on cover-based shooting, much as in *Gears of War*

Instead of trying to improve *Mass Effect*’s clunky inventory, BioWare axed it as well. Possibly a good thing, because their replacement for Mako is quite possibly the worst time-wasting mini-game in the history of videogames: planetary mining.

In short, the player is shown a rotating picture of a planet and then must scan for deposits by holding one mouse button, then shoot mining drones with the other mouse button. It’s insanely mind-numbing. While the Mako-driving segments of the original suffered from certain issues, I cannot for the life of me understand how a designer could think that this scanning system is an improvement.

Thus gameplay is a strange mixture of the utter boredom of scanning planets for resources to upgrade your ship and gear, fluid combat that isn’t really challenging but is quite entertaining, and talking to people to propel the plot forward. As befits a BioWare game, that last part is where the game shines.

A new feature, the ability to interrupt some of the conversations to take action – in either Paragon or Renegade manner – is a novel concept and works surprisingly well. Seeing Shepard punch an annoying journalist or throw a baddie through a window instead of having to listen to their prattle is such a guilty pleasure.

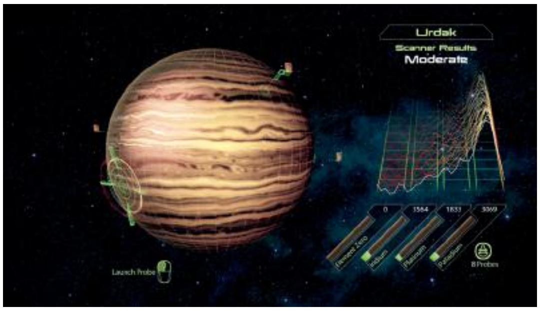
And what about the continuity between games that BioWare so hyped before *ME2* launched? It really isn’t there. Yes, the game gives you little nods here and there to some of the stuff that you did in *ME1,* but it is all cosmetic and has zero effect on gameplay.

The ending of the game is a beacon of hope. The entire party takes part in it and, depending on the choices the player has made throughout the game, certain companions can be permanently killed.

Sadly, *Final Fantasy VI* (1994) is still the reigning champion in this aspect, as Shepard can still only take two companions along in actual combat, while the rest of the party is assigned to various tasks in the background. If only this mechanic had been used more in the game and in more detail, instead of this gimmick that only happens in the last segment of the game.

Thus my reasoning for the opening statement of *Mass Effect 2* being a paradoxical game – the main plot is awful but the companions are good. RPG elements have been stripped out but gameplay is fluid and entertaining. There is good in here, as well as bad – it all depends on what you value more. **GA**

***Mass Effect 2* had over 20 DLC packs. Two of those introduced new companions and came only with new copies of the game, to discourage re-sales. Since 2013, those characters have been made free to download.**



You must gather allies, tech and resources, but exploring planets has been replaced by a dull scanning mini-game

Mods:

Coalesced.ini Mod Manager: Makes modding easy by handling changes made to the configuration file.

Better ME2: Adds some gameplay tweaks, a bit of rebalancing, a cleaner HUD and gamepad support.

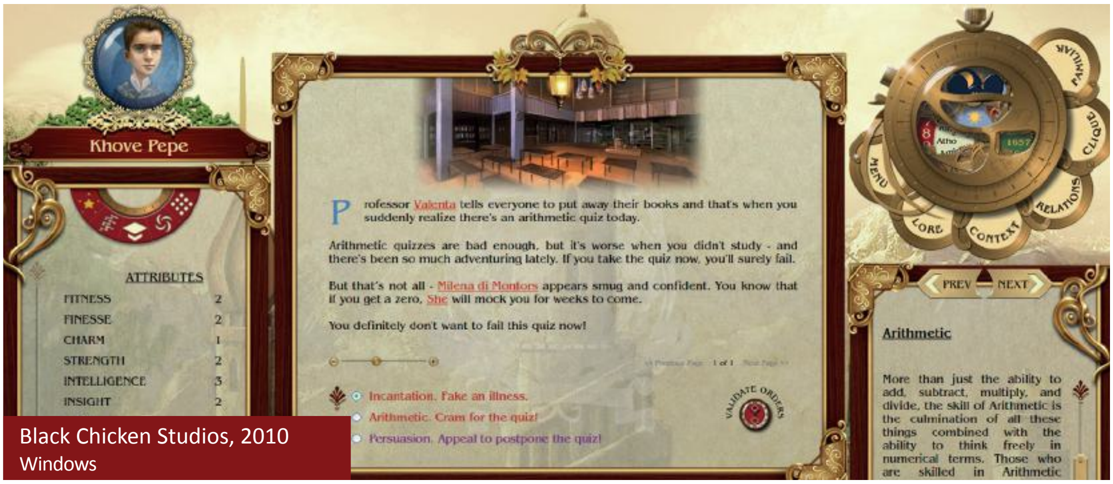
Hybrid Combat: Makes combat similar to *ME1*’s, changing how reloading works, plus other tweaks.

Flash’s Mass Effect 2 Mod: Aims to make the game more balanced and faithful to the lore, e.g. it makes the enemy’s shield regenerate just like yours.

A Lot of Textures: A large pack with new HD textures.

Casual Outfit Beyond Normandy: A pack of casual clothes that you can now wear even outside the ship.

Academagia:
The Making of Mages



FITNESS 2
FINESSE 2
CHARM 1
STRENGTH 2
INTELLIGENCE 3
INSIGHT 2

Professor Valenta tells everyone to put away their books and that's when you suddenly realize there's an arithmetic quiz today.

Arithmetic quizzes are bad enough, but it's worse when you didn't study - and there's been so much adventuring lately. If you take the quiz now, you'll surely fail.

But that's not all - Milena di Montors appears smug and confident. You know that if you get a zero, She will mock you for weeks to come.

You definitely don't want to fail this quiz now!

○ Incantation. Fake an illness.
○ Arithmetic. Cram for the quiz!
○ Persuasion. Appeal to postpone the quiz!

Arithmetic

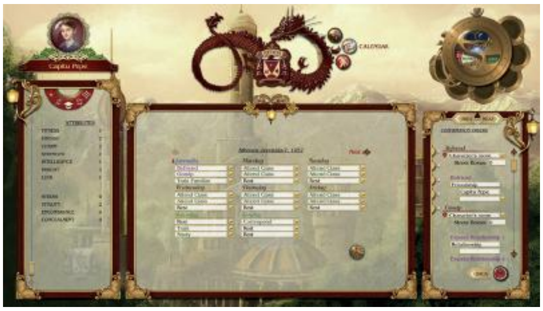
More than just the ability to add, subtract, multiply, and divide, the skill of Arithmetic is the culmination of all these things combined with the ability to think freely in numerical terms. Those who are skilled in Arithmetic

Black Chicken Studios, 2010
Windows

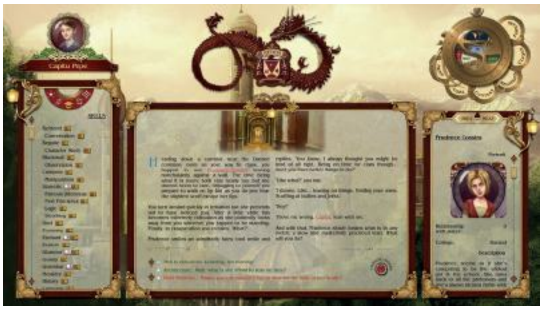
An updated version of *Academagia* was released on Steam in 2017, featuring a new interface and including all previous DLCs.

Academagia starts with the player character, a 12-year-old child on the floating island of Mineta, being invited to attend the Academagia, a magic school. The player first customises their character – choosing stats, traits, backgrounds, a familiar, etc. – then is immediately presented with a dizzying array of options for what to do with his or her time during the school year.

The gameplay is a combination of RPG and Choose-Your-Own-Adventure book – each day is divided into three time slots; the player chooses what to do. Their character can attend classes, study, make friends and go on adventures, during which they'll be presented with various choices to overcome obstacles, where success is determined by their stats.



As in *Princess Maker* you must plan your daily schedule, but *Academagia* offers more options, such as where to study and how much effort to put in



Interactions are all text-based; random events will pop up, offering the chance of a reward or (on failure) humiliation

The game includes one entire school year (the developers are currently working on a sequel with the second year), but it doesn't give any concrete goals beyond "pass all your classes", so the player is free to do pretty much whatever they want. The fun of *Academagia* comes from a combination of exploring role-playing options and interacting with the world, learning how to navigate all the systems to accomplish whatever goals the player sets for themselves.

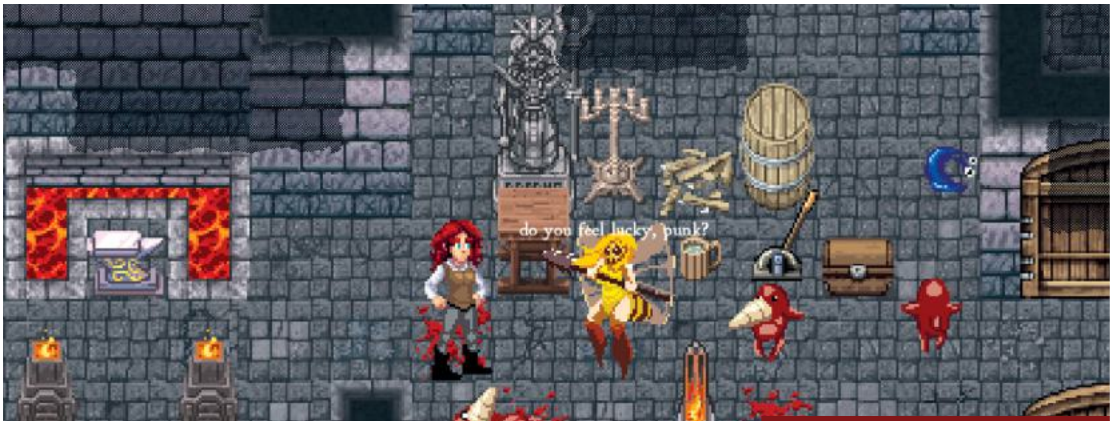
There are a huge number of skills (over 300!), and training in them will often unlock new actions. By the end of the game, the player can have dozens of choices for how to spend every time slot. They can train their familiar, study illegal magic, go shopping, befriend (or bully) other students, cast spells, go on adventures, explore the school grounds and town and more.

The writing and the freedom players have is the strong point here. One of my favourite adventures involves improving the school's terrible cafeteria food. My character burgled prize recipes, incited a riot in the cafeteria, blackmailed the head chef, put on a fancy dinner party for the school faculty, and finally managed to get a new menu implemented. At the end I was feeling a genuine sense of accomplishment.

Academagia does have some flaws – since it was put together by a fairly small team, they didn't have the resources to make sure all the different systems were balanced and useful. For example, shopping for items is a pain as characters can only visit a single store per action, rather than being able to browse among all the stores at once.

However, if you can look past or work through some imbalances in the gameplay, you'll be rewarded with an immensely rich, expansive game and the ability to guide your young wizard from a novice to an expert magician. **JO**

Dungeons of Dredmor



Gaslamp Games, 2011
Windows, Linux and Mac

Dungeons of Dredmor is an interesting take on the modern Roguelike. While many other games try to take elements of the genre and mesh them into other models, *Dredmor* takes the core Roguelike formula and plays around with it to make it accessible and customisable, but hard to master.

The game offers three difficulty levels, plus the option to toggle permadeath and increase or decrease the size of the dungeons. This allows people to play *Dredmor* at their own pace and get a feel for the game before going for the true Roguelike experience. The "No Time to Grind" mode is especially nice, since it speeds up the game, allowing for quick sessions. This ease of access helps to attract those curious about the genre, yet still offers a challenging experience.

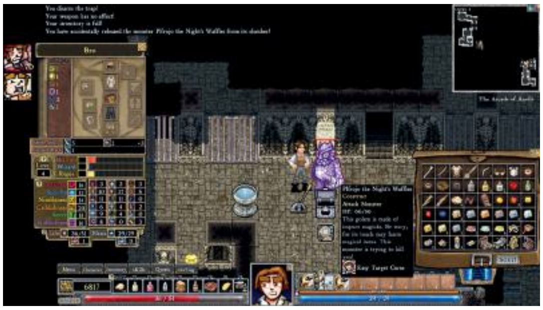
Dungeons of Dredmor's main objective is to reach the bottom of the dungeon and slay the evil Lord Dredmor. While it sounds run-of-the-mill, everything else is goofy and light-hearted in nature. The game has no qualms about taking common game tropes and putting a ridiculous spin on them, such as item vending machines, enemies shouting witty remarks, countless pop culture references and some humorous item and skill descriptions.

Another unique thing is the progression system. Unlike standard Roguelikes, in which there's a focus on stats and gear, *Dungeons of Dredmor* relies on skill trees for character growth. Players pick seven out of the 20 skills (32 with the expansions and countless more through mods) available to them and are dumped into the game. The skill trees range from traditional ones such as Swords and Smithing to humorous ones like Emomancy, Communist and Tourist. Each skill influences things like starting gear, passive traits and active skills; however, players only get one skill point per level, so it's important to choose wisely.

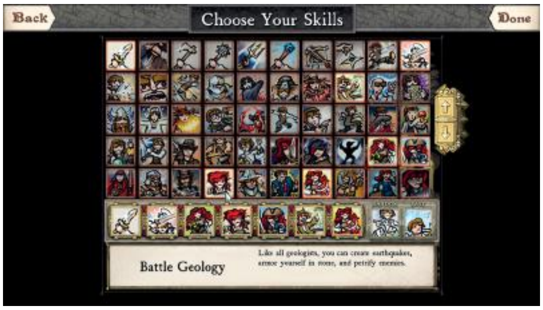
Depending on what skills players have picked, they can also craft various forms of gear from random materials found in the dungeon. Crafted items can range from standard weapons and armour to more exotic things such as potions, traps, wands and – why not – a clockwork power-limb. This gives the player an element of control they can establish among all the random variables, allowing them to build towards optimal victory or silly gimmick builds.

Dungeons of Dredmor's skill system offers so much flexibility that I personally kept coming back, clocking more than 300 hours of game time. It's a great alternative take on the Roguelike model, a very accessible introduction for newcomers, and can offer something to anyone who's willing to play it. **JR**

***Dungeons of Dredmor* has three DLCs that add numerous new items, monsters and classes. The first DLC was released for free, as a gift to the community.**



The friendly visuals, accessible UI, lighthearted tone and many difficulty options helped *Dredmor* bring classic Roguelikes to a wider audience

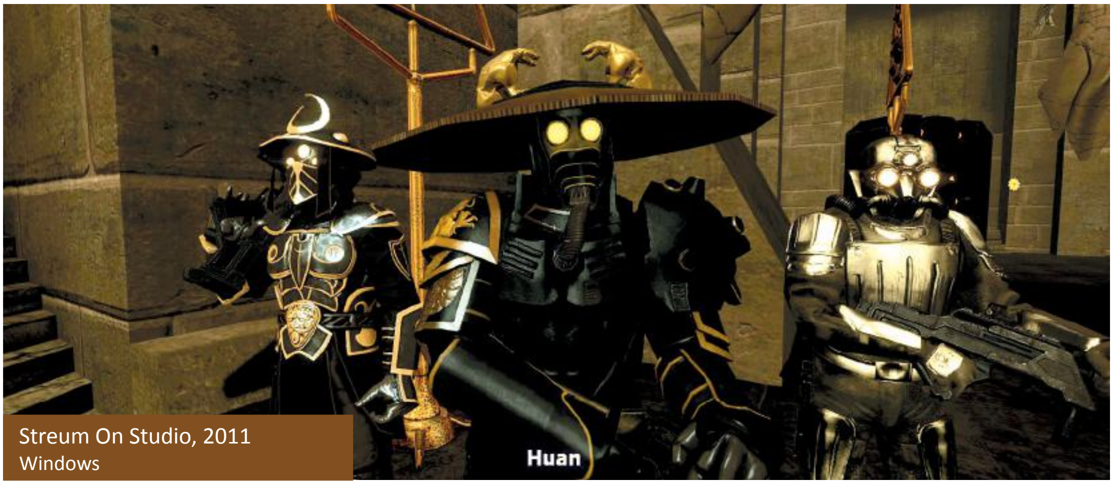


Battle Geology

Like all geologists, you can create earthquakes, armor yourself in stone, and petrify enemies.

Dredmor offers the rare chance to play as a dual-wielding vegan geologist pirate with mathemagical powers and communist leanings

E.Y.E:
Divine Cybermancy



Streum On Studio, 2011
Windows

Released in 2011, *E.Y.E: Divine Cybermancy* is the debut of French Streum On Studio. It is an ambitious and unique shooter/RPG hybrid, which is interesting, considering how shamelessly it borrows influences from various sources, especially from pulp fiction like *Warhammer 40k*, *Shadowrun*, Lovecraftian horror and other videogames.

The game takes place in an amalgam of various settings that you might recognise immediately – a dystopian future in which humanity is ruled by feuding megacorps, contact has been made with hostile aliens, and the world is threatened by the coming of the "metastreumonic force", a mysterious throng of beasts spawned from psionics and nightmares. The player is a member of the titular E.Y.E – an organisation of psionic cybercommando warrior-monks. But E.Y.E is no exception to the rest of the world – its once-brotherly factions of Jian Shang Di and Culter Dei are now at each other's throats.

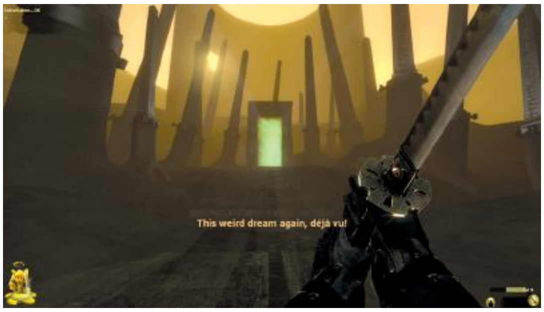
E.Y.E is a game about many things, but it is primarily about confusion, chaos and betrayal. Make no mistake, the paragraph above covers just about the only things you can be certain of (or can you?) when it comes to the game's narrative.

Events that will make you question the entire game start happening very soon, and accompany you all the way to the "end". The atmosphere crafted in this game is superb, and it takes you on a true roller-coaster of emotions and sensations. This is achieved thanks to the mix of the mundane and the mystical.

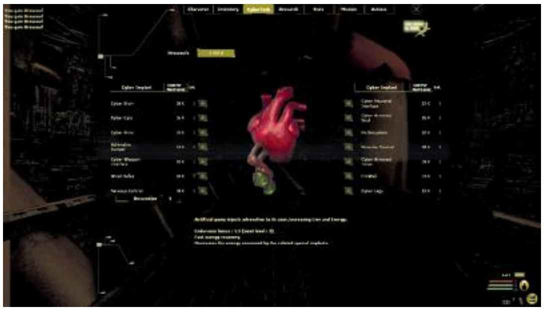
On one hand, you have typical special ops missions that require you to infiltrate various places, perform false flag operations, etc. But on the other, everything is coated with a layer of esotericism – unexplainable events take place, your character suffers repeated bouts of amnesia, delusion and insanity. As you keep playing, you realise you simply have no one to trust, not even yourself, and the game laughs in your face every time you think you finally understand it.

All these aspects also contribute a lot to another of *E.Y.E*'s highlights – its non-linearity. There are a few moments when you need to take sides and make decisions that influence the rest of the campaign. This adds tons of replayability, but also further enforces your paranoia. Do I betray the guy who is probably betraying me as we speak for the other faction that is shady as hell? Or maybe I should choose the third dude who's been acting suspiciously since the start!

Before *E.Y.E*, the developers created a *Half-Life* mod called *Syndicate Black Ops*. It was released in 2004 and set in the same universe as *E.Y.E.*

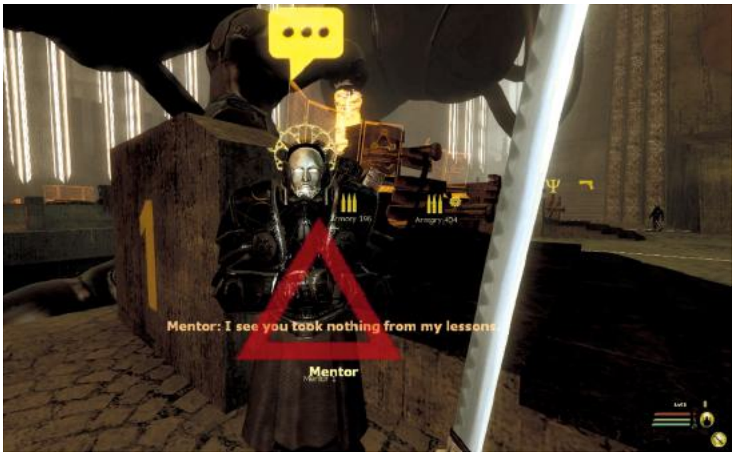


The visuals vary between cyberpunk dystopias, cryptic dreamscapes and windswept wastelands



The character-building options are vast, including skills, implants, psi powers and even a research system

> “We believe the role of the developers is not necessarily to please the player, nor to simplify the games. Doing that might drive to what is more and more frequent: a standardisation of the market. And in *E.Y.E* it is essential for the dramatic tension to let the player assume his own choices.”
>
> *– Streum On Studio*



Nothing is certain in *E.Y.E*; the weird dialogues and unusual narrative will keep you second-guessing the whole game, and there are multiple endings to uncover

As for mechanics, *E.Y.E* manages to be both a solid shooter and an RPG, which is an impressive feat. It gives you plenty of guns that really feel like proper guns, have various ups and downs, traits, recoil, hitbox-varied damage, etc., including a four-bullet hand cannon and a miniature nuke launcher.

You can also use melee weapons and grenades, set up turrets and grab a gun drone to follow you around. The enemies obviously respond in kind, rushing you en masse, sniping from afar or using some seriously heavy ordnance like plasma cannons and gunships.

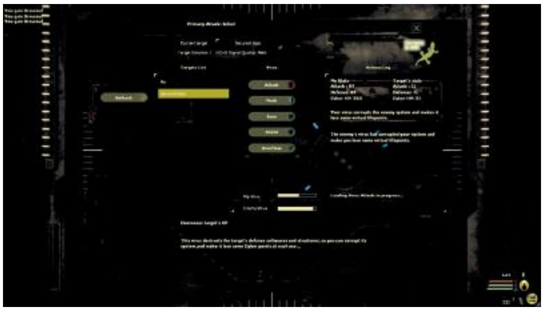
The neat thing is that you can also toggle the difficulty to your liking with sliders for the AI’s accuracy, reflexes, etc. On the RPG side, you have a lot of customisation available to you. Apart from guns, you can also get a whole lot of psionic powers, cyber augmentations and stat boosts, which are bought or acquired via research and XP. You can also hack everything (or everyone) you encounter in different ways – destroy, leech stamina or even take control. Just be careful you don’t get counter-hacked.

The differences between playing a melee beast, a sharpshooter and a psyker are also fairly large, and support different playstyles well.

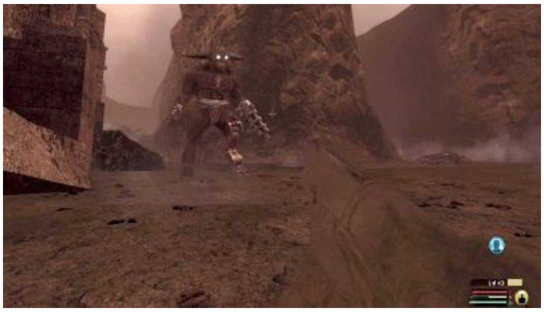
The technical side is also an important contributor to the overall atmosphere. *E.Y.E* is running on the dated Source Engine, but the developers still managed to squeeze a lot of juice out of it, mostly thanks to the art direction. The environments are fairly varied, including futuristic cyberpunk cities, red dunes of Mars, mysterious ruins and Asian-inspired temples.

Finally – and this is a funny point – *E.Y.E* has been infamous since its release because of its downright terrible translation. Indeed, the dialogues and flavour texts have some seriously broken grammar and bizarre choices of vocabulary, and are generally confusing, although not to the point of making the game unplayable. Interestingly enough, this botched translation actually contributes a lot to the overall feeling of estrangement, as the oneiric atmosphere is only further strengthened when every character sounds either like a mystical sensei or a raving lunatic.

E.Y.E is a very cool game, and one that I can recommend wholeheartedly. It takes a while to get used to, can sometimes be crushingly difficult, and you’ll wonder what the hell is going on all the time, but the ride is definitely worth it, and it can also be played in co-op if you want to get confused with some buddies. Just make sure you patch it properly. **DR**

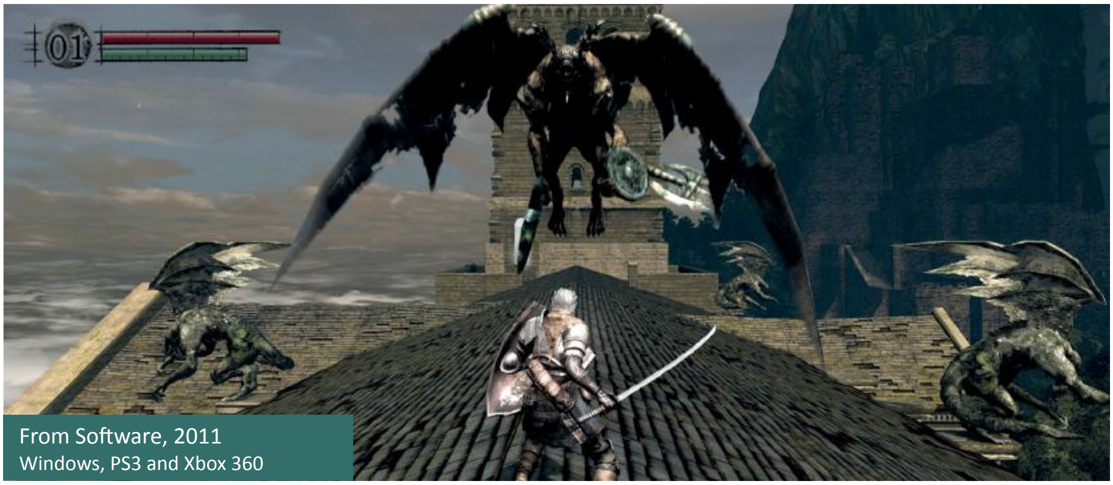


The hacking mini-game has you selecting actions to invade an AI that can – and will – hack you back



Some of *E.Y.E’s* inspirations are a little less subtle than others, such as this “cybernetic demon”

Dark Souls

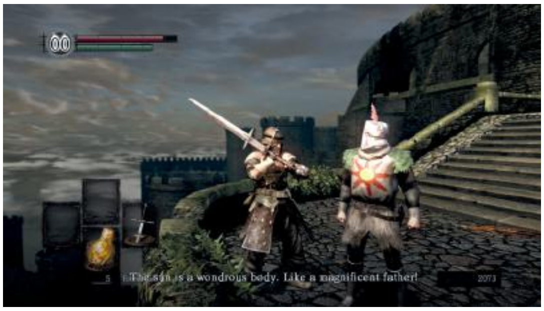

From Software, 2011
Windows, PS3 and Xbox 360

Initially, there were no plans for a PC port, but fans created an online petition and gathered more than 93,000 signatures, surprising the developers.

To talk about *Dark Souls*, one has to first talk about *Demon's Souls*. An action-RPG released on PlayStation 3 to little initial fanfare (to the point of being passed over by Sony for localisation, a decision they later came to regret) it gradually acquired a cult following. There are many reasons for its appeal, but the most often-cited are its unforgiving but fair difficulty, methodical and balanced battle system, smart level design, well-realised, starkly gothic setting, and unique, entirely novel, asynchronous and synchronous multiplayer features.

Dark Souls builds upon this foundation, adding a seamlessly traversable, interconnected world with even more content and multiplayer opportunities added into the mix, making *Demon's Souls* feel like a beta test for what would become *Dark Souls*.

In terms of plot, *Dark Souls* is minimalistic, and it depends upon players piecing together background information presented in item descriptions and environmental clues to fully understand its lore. It takes place in a universe where many humans are cursed with the "Darksign", forcing them to wander the earth for eternity, reviving after each death, slowly losing their humanity. Players are cast into the role of the "Chosen Undead", and must end this curse.



The eccentric NPCs in *Dark Souls* offer an organic style of side-quest; their stories progress as you play, shaped by your actions

Over the course of this endeavour, they'll interact with eclectic – and often eccentric – NPCs, many of whom are involved in their own quests. Like the main story of the game, most of these side-quests and their outcomes are not immediately obvious, and need to be discovered. In fact, it could well be the case that anyone playing the game for the first time and without accessing third-party information will not even realise that they are happening, and that their actions might have changed some outcome.

Analysing *Dark Souls* in comparison with other RPGs, it falls into the category of classless ARPGs with an open story and world structure. While players choose a starting class when creating their character, it only serves to determine their initial stat distribution, as well as starting equipment and spells. Afterwards, every character can freely distribute points to various stats at level-up, and use any given equipment or spell as long as they meet its requirements.

The mechanics of saving and death are quite unique, and linked intrinsically with the game's story. As in *Planescape: Torment*, you play a character who is essentially immortal. However, unlike that game, there is a strict penalty for death, and saving is constant and automatic, meaning you must endure every choice you make. Upon death, the game returns you to the last bonfire (serving as checkpoints) you rested at, and all your Souls (the game's currency, used both to purchase items and to level up) are lost.

You may retrieve them where you died, but dying again while trying to do so will result in them disappearing forever. This rather unforgiving system has earned the game its reputation for difficulty, together with the requirement for careful exploration and concentration in every battle, which we will discuss next.

> "I would like players to conquer the difficulty and enjoy taking on formidable enemies and going back and forth in dungeons. The process of overcoming the challenge and the feeling of accomplishment brought by breaking through each difficulty is the value we would like to offer to them."
>
> *– Hidetaka Miyazaki,*
> Dark Souls*' director*

30
Soul Arrow
Gaping Dragon
7
Estus Flask
1176

Dark Souls' many challenges seem impossible at first, but they are all fair and achievable by a focused player

Battles in *Dark Souls* are quite a different affair from those in most other ARPGs. They don't fit in at all with *Diablo* clones and their hordes of enemies, opting for a smaller number of more dangerous foes. Neither are they trying to emulate pure action games with their complex systems of combos. Instead, they are comparatively slow and thoughtful affairs, in which careful positioning and choosing your weapons, as well as the field of battle, wisely for each encounter is at least as important as fast reflexes.

A central component to the system is Stamina, a replenishing resource used up when attacking, blocking with a shield, evading and casting spells. Managing Stamina is essential to being successful in battles.

Many of the game's systems are carefully designed in order to enhance the situational nature of battles – e.g. using a polearm in a confined tunnel is inadvisable, as collisions between your weapon and level geometry are actually detected. This focus on rewarding careful approaches is evident in another major strength of the game: its exploration.

The world and its levels are deeply interwoven, filled with secrets, deadly traps and shortcuts that make deeper forays from each bonfire easier. In this context, *Dark Souls'* asynchronous multiplayer features need to be mentioned.

Equipment
Select item to equip
LB
RB
4
1
1
16
35
Whisper
Covenant
Way of White
Level
93
Souls
48848
Vitality
13
Attunement
14
Endurance
23
Strength
36
Dexterity
20
Resistance
10
Intelligence
47
Faith
11
Humanity
0
Usable Item
Estus Flask+6
:Select
:Enter
:Close
:Unequip Item
:Toggle Status

Almost every equipment piece in *Dark Souls* is a viable choice, allowing for extremely diverse playstyles

The game allows players to place messages in the form of glowing runes on the ground. These can point out hidden paths, treasure, traps or enemies – or they can be false and made to lead trusting players to their deaths. Similarly, player deaths result in bloodstains in other players' worlds, and can be touched in order to see the dying player's last moments as a phantom.

On the topic of phantoms, while *Dark Souls* is a fantastic single-player RPG, it also features a multitude of popular multiplayer options based on the concept of phantoms visiting – or invading – the world of a host player, neatly circumventing the plethora of continuity and design issues that might occur when trying to fit multiplayer into a single-player RPG.

Dark Souls' combination of challenging battles, exquisitely designed levels, deadly bosses and punishing death mechanics had such influence that it gave birth to its own sub-genre, with *Dark Souls II* (2014), *Bloodborne* (2015), *Dark Souls III* (2016) and several others that followed, such as *Lords of the Fallen* (2014), *Salt and Sanctuary* (2016), *Nioh* (2017), etc. It's a punishing but rewarding experience, as all these dangers are almost invariably fair and can be mastered by learning the game's mechanics, carefully studying each environment and always proceeding with caution. **DU**

In 2018, From Software released *Dark Souls Remastered* for PC, PS4, Xbox One and Switch, adding improved graphics, frame rate and online features.

Mods:

DSFix: Released the same day as the game's lousy PC port, this mod unlocks the game's resolution and/or frame rate, among other improvements. A must-have.

Prepare to Die AGAIN: This mod aims to give veteran players the excitement and mystery of playing *Dark Souls* for the first time by changing the locations of enemies, items and bonfires. Great for a replay.

Hyper-Aggressive Enemies: Makes enemies able to see you from afar and chase you anywhere. Use it with the *Self Gravelording* mod for the ultimate challenge.

The Witcher 2:
Assassins of Kings

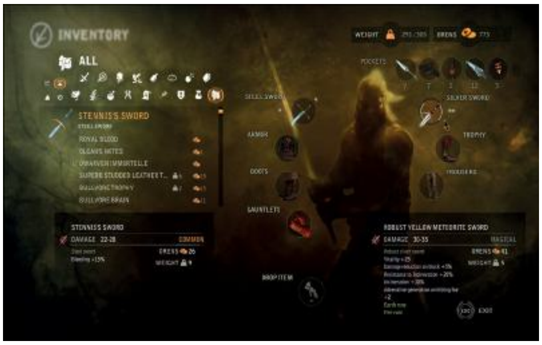
CD Projekt RED, 2011
Windows, Linux, Mac and Xbox 360*

***In 2012, CD Projekt released *The Witcher 2: Enhanced Edition.* It added over 10GB of new content, and was a free update for those who already owned the game.**

A sequel to the surprise hit *The Witcher* (2007), *Assassins of Kings* puts Geralt of Rivia on the trail of the eponymous assassins, who just killed King Foltest of Temeria, for whom the protagonist has been working as a bodyguard after the events of the first game. Accused of regicide, Geralt needs to seek out the real murderers to prove his innocence and, with his usual luck, gets entangled in more than one political and military conflict along the way.

The game's differences from its predecessor are visible at first glance. It runs on an entirely new engine (called REDengine), developed from scratch by CD-Projekt RED and was, at the time of its release, one of the best-looking games on the market. Sound and music follow suit, although the soundtrack by Adam Skorupa and Krzysztof Wierzynkiewicz has a more traditional orchestral flair than the folk-inspired bagpipe music of the first game.

Gameplay-wise, the original's unusual top-down view and point-and-click movement are gone – the camera is now fixed squarely behind Geralt's back, with his moves controlled by keyboard only, which brings the player much closer to the action. There are also significantly more cutscenes.



The inventory was entirely redone to better fit controllers, but feels rather awkward when using mouse and keyboard

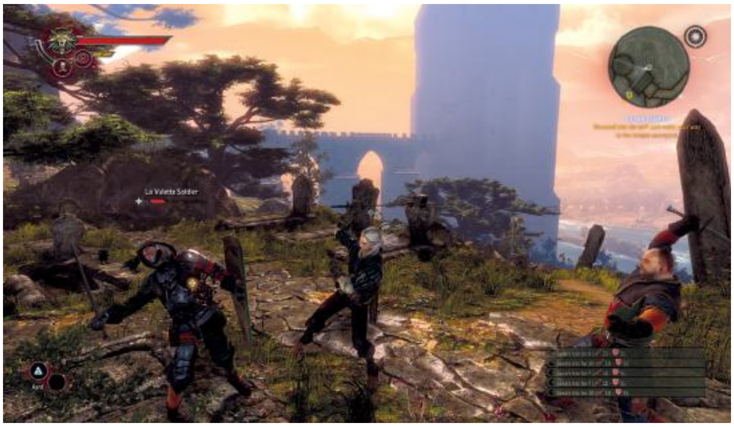
Most of the systems from *The Witcher* are still present, although simplified or streamlined. Alchemy does not require an alcohol base any more, and can be performed anywhere, since meditation does not require a bonfire any more. Inventory has been switched from grid-based to list-based, optimised for controllers. New additions include a rudimentary stealth mode and Quick-Time Events, both appearing a few times in the game. The fist-fighting and dice/poker mini-games make a return, and a new arm-wrestling mini-game has been added.

The character system has been reworked from scratch and consists of three separate skill trees, one each for sword-fighting, magic (witcher signs), and alchemy, with the most powerful skills unlocked only after certain prerequisites are met. In addition, Geralt will find rare items called mutagens, which randomly drop from monsters and/or are created as by-products of alchemy. These mutagens can then be inserted into slots attached to some skills (13 in total, mostly in the alchemy tree), granting permanent bonuses.

The game is comparable in size to its predecessor, with similar ratios of dialogue to combat to exploration. The number of people that Geralt can talk to is somewhat reduced, but they are a more diverse and colourful bunch and have more to say, on average. It is perhaps worth noting that the number of casual sex encounters has been reduced, as Geralt is now in a more-or-less stable relationship with sorceress Triss Merigold.

Wilderness areas are not as open as in the first game and usually resemble a collection of intertwining wide corridors. This makes the world seem smaller, although Geralt will spend a similar amount of time running around it, including some dungeon-delving into caves, mines and crypts.

> "We really created an ambitious game and we didn't want to limit our artistic expression. Nudity is considered normal in the best TV shows nowadays, especially when it serves the story – so why should gamers be treated like children? The sex themes in *The Witcher 2* are deeply rooted in the story, and they are not there just to show off."
>
> *– Maciej Szczesnik, Lead Combat designer*



Combat became more action-oriented, with Geralt mixing strong and fast attacks with the occasional (or maybe frequent) dodge roll

In May 2011, the Polish version of Playboy featured one of the game's characters, Triss Merigold, on its cover.

Combat has been changed from the mouse-driven system of the original game to a more typical action RPG system with a third-person camera. The three separate fighting stances are gone, with fast and strong attacks instead just mapped to different keys. Geralt still uses two swords – steel against normal and silver against supernatural opponents – but he can now also throw knives for a rudimentary ranged attack.

Other melee weapons, such as axes, hammers, clubs and halberds are available, but, as in the first game, much less effective than swords. Defensive moves include rolling and blocking, the latter consuming vigour, which is also the resource used for casting signs – a kind of witcher magic. Signs work more or less as before, except for Quen, which now creates magical armour that absorbs damage.

One of the strongest points of *The Witcher 2* is the plot, which in my opinion is significantly better than the first game's. What makes it truly unique is the ability to experience the game's second chapter from one of two distinct perspectives. Depending on a choice made in the previous chapter, Geralt will end up either in a besieged dwarven fortress town or in the military camp of the army laying said siege, with each option providing unique quests, storylines and points of view for the unfolding events.

This binary choice gives an incentive to replay the game and allows for additional insight into the story and motivations of certain characters, if the player plays through both of the paths.

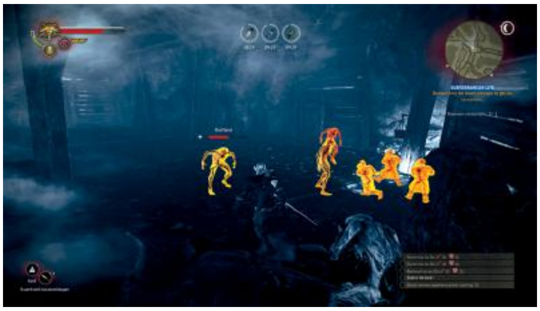
In all honesty, if you expect a straight follow-up to *The Witcher*, you might not like *Assassins of Kings*. The differences are numerous and affect the game on many levels, and there is no question that the sequel is mechanically more shallow. On the other hand, *The Witcher 2* is still a great-looking (and sounding), enjoyable action RPG with great characters and a deep, complex plot, just like its predecessor. It is simply cut from a different mould. **WM**

Mods:

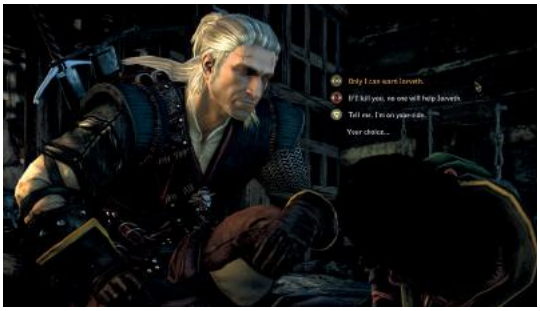
In 2013, CD Projekt released the REDKit, an editor for *The Witcher 2*. Sadly, few mods were ever finished, most being cosmetic changes, but here are two highlights:

Full Combat Rebalance 2: Mod created by Andrzej Kwiatkowski, now a gameplay designer at CD Projekt. The mod is huge and includes changes to the game's balance, tweaks to the combat and new animations.

Enhanced Mod Compilation: A compilation of minor changes that offer quality-of-life improvements, like reducing some items' weight and adding auto-loot.

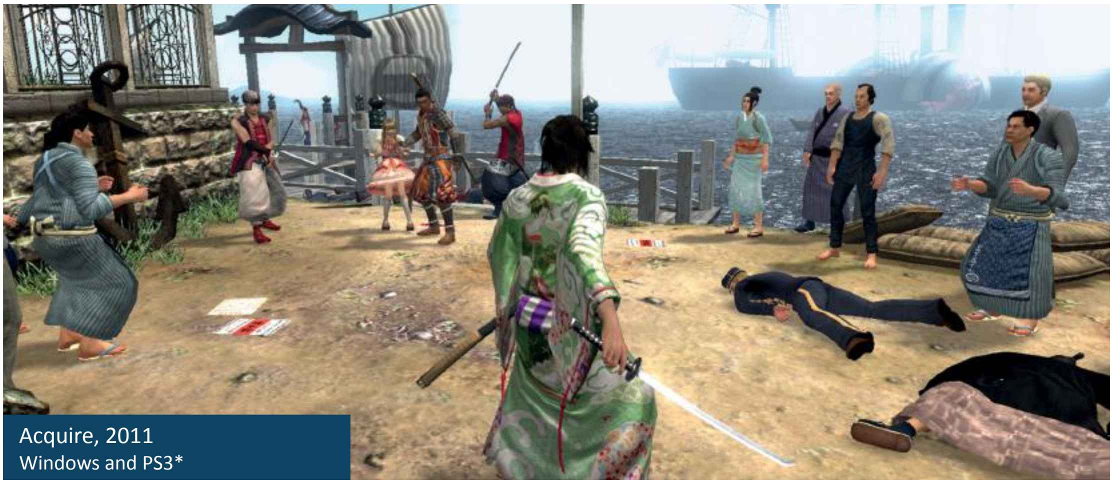


Witchers are hunters, so being prepared is key: potions, for example, can let you see enemies in dark areas



The game is full of choices that impact the story, including one that splits the game into two entirely different paths

Way of the Samurai 4



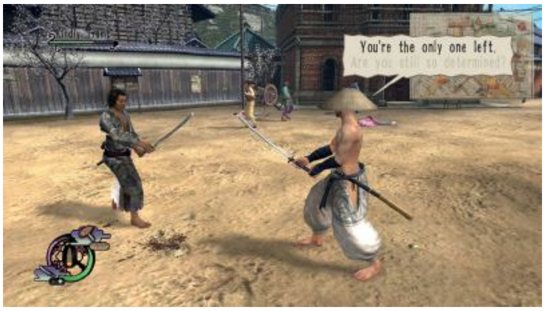
Acquire, 2011
Windows and PS3*

Way of the Samurai 4 was first released in 2011 in Japan. It reached the West in 2012, but the PC port came only in 2015, released by Ghostlight.

Often, one of the most talked-about aspects of RPGs is their size and length. Since the '80s, magazine ads have boasted "30 dungeons", "over 200 monsters" and "dozens of hours of fun", and the trend only got stronger with the rise of gargantuan RPGs like the Elder Scrolls or the Witcher series – games that can take over 60 hours to beat, with some players enduring over a hundred hours in a single playthrough.

However, keeping a lengthy, epic narrative on track is very tricky when the game has to factor in the player's decisions, as many RPGs do. A very common solution is for choices to branch out only for a while, then quickly tie back into the main narrative. It's what games like *Mass Effect* do – choices are accounted for, but even if you are the worst bastard who ever lived you'll still have to do X and Y to save the galaxy.

Going in direct opposition to this philosophy is the *Way of the Samurai* series. The first game, released in 2002 for the PlayStation 2, cast the player as a wandering ronin who enters a small remote village. From there on, everything was up to the player – they could get involved in a conflict between local factions, try to protect a woman from bandits, kill everyone they see or just casually cross the village and leave, "finishing" the game in under five minutes.



You can sometimes talk to enemies during combat to persuade them, or use the back of your blade to knock them out

Way of the Samurai 4 was the first game of the series released on PC (now also joined by *Way of the Samurai 3*) and it's arguably the best among them. You create a ronin who arrives at the port town of Amihama. The game is set in 1855, during the Bakumatsu period, when the Shogunate was at its end and the Japanese were suffering the incursion of foreign warships into their waters – often on unfriendly terms. This tension is portrayed in three main factions: the Shogunate forces, a visiting British ambassador and a group of anti-foreigner extremists.

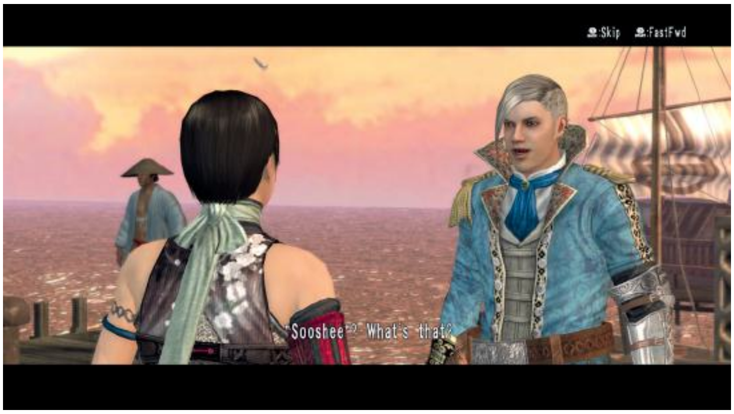
As you arrive in town, a fight breaks out between the factions, and it's up to you to pick a side – or simply walk away. It's a game that trades length for width; the town is tiny, with just nine small areas, and there's only a handful of key characters to interact with. But within this limited setup you can explore many possibilities, with entirely different outcomes.

Maybe you want to side with a faction, only to betray it later. Or you'll devote yourself to helping a single character. Perhaps you're in town just to fight in a tournament, or to steal from shops. You can play a silent character who refuses to answer any question, or draw your blade during conversations and attack.

Way of the Samurai 4 is a game designed to be replayed many times, learning about the characters, the world and the consequences of your actions. Your money, items, weapons and, better yet, choices will carry into your next playthroughs in various ways, from store prices to expanding your possibilities.

For example, your Japanese ronin won't be able to understand most foreigners at first. However, if you help build a language school, it will remain there in future playthroughs, so your next characters will now understand the foreigners – and that will open new story possibilities for you to explore.

> “The last game was set during the Warring States period in the 1500s, so we had been aiming for a rough, cool feel, but for this one we wanted flashy, ostentatious visuals and therefore decided to set it at the dawn of intercultural exchange. [...] We did consider to some degree that this era might be appealing in the event that the game was released overseas.”
>
> *– Tetsushi Saito,*
> WotS 4*’s lead designer*



Sooshee? What's that?

The game plays with the culture shock between Japan and the West in a humorous and often over-the-top tone

There’s a strong meta-aspect to the game, as each time you finish it you’ll gain points to unlock more features, like playable female characters, harder difficulty settings, new customisation options, and more combat choices, such as dual-wielding or using guns.

Speaking of combat, *Way of the Samurai 4* makes great use of sword fighting. While you may fight large numbers, battles are always one at a time. There’s a strong and a fast attack button, plus a block, and your attacks change with your directional input, from lunges to overhead attacks, depending on your choice of fighting style and your character’s mastery of it.

The trick is that you begin with a plain katana and a basic sword-fighting style, but you’ll collect more weapons and fighting styles as you defeat your enemies. There are over 70 styles to unlock, including various sword stances, dual-wielding, spears, shinobi style and hand-to-hand combat.

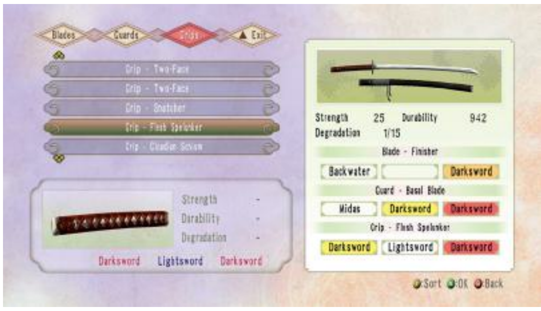
Enemies will always drop the weapons they use, and you can equip or disassemble them and use the parts to forge a new blade with special properties. Just remember to repair them often, as they quickly break. There are over a hundred weapons in the game, and collecting exotic swords and styles can become a goal in itself, as some are well-hidden and others are only available on specific difficulty settings.

While a regular playthrough is very short, there’s a large amount of side content to explore, from the aforementioned weapon and style collecting and post-game unlockables to various side-quests and “kill X number of people” challenges. You can even manage a dojo, recruit students and create your own fighting style. While most of these are tasks are fun and will happen naturally, fully unlocking all the game has to offer can be a rather repetitive task.

What can also be a bit too much is the tone of the game. The series always had some silly Japanese humour and over-the-top characters, but here it reaches extreme levels of wackiness, with a Lolita-like ambassador, a knight named Megamelons, a trio of sadistic sisters who love torture and a “night-crawling” mini-game in which you must sneak into your lover’s bed at night. *Yakuza* fans will be right at home.

Regardless, *Way of the Samurai 4* is a fantastic game that offers fun and challenging combat, a cast of memorable characters and an incredibly fresh take on game design. Replayability and player freedom are the keys here, and it’s a joy to slowly get to know the game’s characters, areas and events like the back of your hand, then disrupt their inner workings – helping, rescuing and killing different characters, just to see how the game adapts and weaves new stories. **FE**

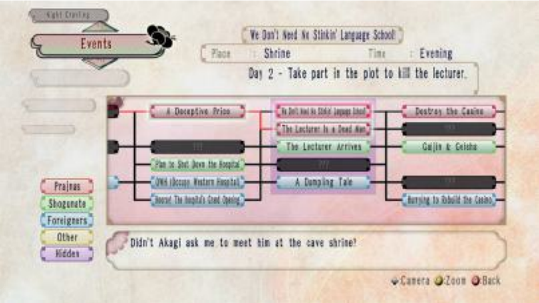
***WotS 4*'s excellent soundtrack was composed by Noriyuki Asakura, who also worked on the popular *Rurouni Kenshin* (a.k.a. *Samurai X*) anime, set in the same period.**



Strength 25 Durability 942
Degradation 1/15
Blade - Finisher
Backwater | | Darksword
Guard - Basal Blade
Midas | Darksword | Darksword
Grip - Flesh Spelunker
Darksword | Lightsword | Darksword

Strength -
Durability -
Degradation -
Darksword Lightsword Darksword

You can disassemble weapons you collect and use them to forge entirely new ones with various special abilities



We Don't Need No Stinkin' Language School
Place : Shrine Time : Evening
Day 2 - Take part in the plot to kill the lecturer.

Didn't Akagi ask me to meet him at the cave shrine?

Your journal displays the various events and paths you’ve gone through, and hints on how to unlock new ones

The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim

Bethesda Softworks, 2011
Windows, Xbox 360 and PS3*

***In 2016 Bethesda released *Skyrim Special Edition,* a remaster for Xbox One and PS4. Later the game also received a Nintendo Switch port, a VR version and a 10-year anniversary edition.**

There is a time early in a child's life at which they discover a special power that children have: the theatre of the mind. It is during this time that common objects acquire the most delightful properties. A broomstick flies. A trashcan is a shield, a twig becomes a sword, and that shrubbery over yonder is a forest begging to be explored in search of treasure to gather and fiends to banish.

Yet it is the oddest thing, that as children grow into adults they lose this special power. This happens in such a quiet, demure way, that most of us never realise it's gone, or even that we ever had it in the first place. *Skyrim* is the kind of game that makes us remember.

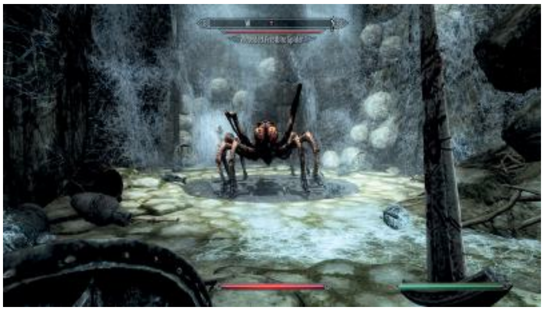
The uncanny valley is in full effect in this grandiose epic: the vastness of its open world and the density of its vegetation brings into full focus the fact that there's something off about that guy's face. Or that, given enough skill and darkness, a mischievous player may very well steal the clothes a character is wearing – without her noticing.

But Bethesda's grand epic shrugs the uncanny valley away with an eye for playfulness and a knack for re-awakening that repressed power of imagination dwelling somewhere within its players' skulls.

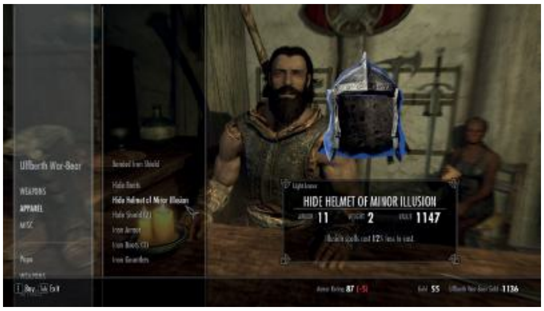
This is first-person action role-playing by the numbers, then. Press left to strike, right to block, both for a shield bash, or hold for a charge attack. Ranged combat is even simpler, while magic simply lets you assign a spell to each button. There is a nice heft to the clash of sword (or fang!) on shield, and an audible tautness to the bowstring, but there is little more to combat than sloppy timing.

Character development, too, feels slightly underwhelming. *Skyrim* uses the classic skill-up-by-using system, and it is well-implemented, but in many areas improvement doesn't seem to translate to the screen well enough. On the other hand, there are the powerful Dragon Shout spells to acquire by exploring the world, and even several talent trees on which to invest points. These are hit-and-miss, with some very worthwhile and fun abilities to be found, and several underwhelming ones.

It's all about the world, really. Criticism can fairly be levelled at nearly every other aspect of the game – the swordplay feels floaty, magic is different flavours of projectile combat, crafting is grindy and uninspired, the enemies are mostly damage sponges rushing you, and those ancient ruins all look strangely alike.

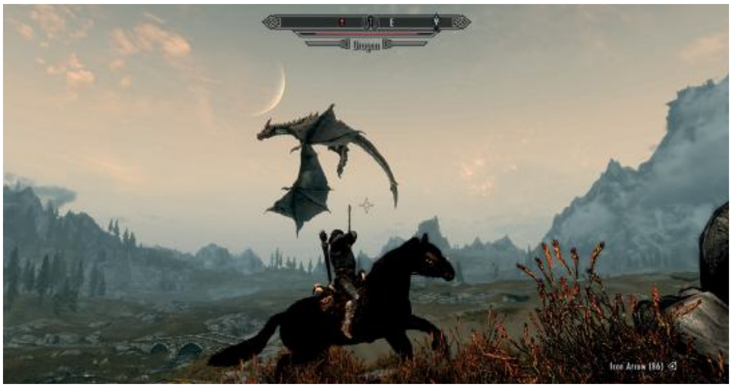


Once again you can play in both first- and third-person modes, but this time the combat feels a lot more weighty



The interface is slick and allows you to examine objects in 3D, but it plays horribly using keyboard and mouse

> "We give the player a lot of credit, we trust him. We give him all these tools and we teach him this stuff and he's an excellent player-director. He wants downtime, he goes to town and talks to people. Says he wants some challenge – 'I'm gonna fight that dragon I heard about'. It becomes much harder to put the game down. He is the director of his experience."
>
> *– Todd Howard,*
> Skyrim *lead producer*



Riding a horse across the vast plains in pursuit of a dragon is the kind of emergent experience that *Skyrim* excels at

And yet, these negatives seem small, pitiful even, when standing at the edge of the Throat of the World and looking down, past the fog and into the green fields west of Whiterun, recognising that small outcrop of rocks where you once stumbled into a cadre of Redguard assassins.

The negatives float away when, low on health and provisions, you find yourself running for your life from a high-level dragon (and asking yourself: "why did I install the mod that makes dragons deadlier?!") – and all of a sudden, into the legs of a mountain giant. You then make your escape into a nearby cave while the two behemoths clash outside – and venture in for whatever new discovery awaits inside. And there's always something to be discovered.

Skyrim is a game of moments, of small random occurrences, of carefully orchestrated plans going to hell because of stupid NPCs, of moments posing in front of breathtaking views, of sitting by the fire, an action with no gameplay benefits whatsoever, done simply because you feel like hearing that bard sing again about how Ulfric is the High King – and in his great honour we shall drink and sing. It is this tapestry of micro-experiences that breathes life into a player's sojourn in the icy lands of northern Tamriel.

Skyrim is not meant to be a simulation, or a twitch experience. It is, quite frankly, not even much of a role-playing experience – unless you use your rediscovered imagination to fill in the blanks. Then, it shines like few others. **LM**

***Skyrim* had three expansions: *Dawnguard* and *Dragonborn,* which add extra areas and content, and *Hearthfire,* which adds the ability to build your own house.**

Mods:

Skyrim's mod scene is one of the biggest in videogame history, with NexusMods reporting over 100,000 mods for *Skyrim* and *Skyrim Special Edition* (they aren't compatible). We recommend playing *Special Edition* (Skyrim SE) and checking for mod installation tips at the r/skyrimmods reddit. Here are a few recommended mods:

Mod Organizer 2: A handy tool to help manage the mods.

SkyUI: Absolutely essential, this mod replaces *Skyrim*'s default interface for one better suited to keyboard and mouse, with sortable columns and other cool features.

Unofficial Skyrim SE Patch: Provides important bug fixes.

SSE Engine Fixes: Another very important bug fix mod.

Alternate Start - Live Another Life: Allows you to skip the long introduction and start the game in one of many wildly different locations and situations. Great for replays.

Immersive Weapons and Armour: Adds over 100 new weapons and 50 new armour sets, all lore-friendly.

Climates of Tamriel: Changes the weather and lighting, for more atmospheric visuals and darker dungeons.

Requiem: A hardcore overhaul mod, it changes *Skyrim* into a harsh and more realistic game. For old-school RPG fans.

Deadly Dragons: This mod adds unique dragons to the game and makes them smarter and tougher to defeat.

Enderal - The Shards of Order: Developed by the same team who made the excellent *Nehrim* mod for *Oblivion*, it offers an entirely new world, a new levelling system and a much heavier focus on storytelling.

Moonpath to Elsweyr: One of the oldest of *Skyrim* quest mods, downloaded over 2.5 million times.

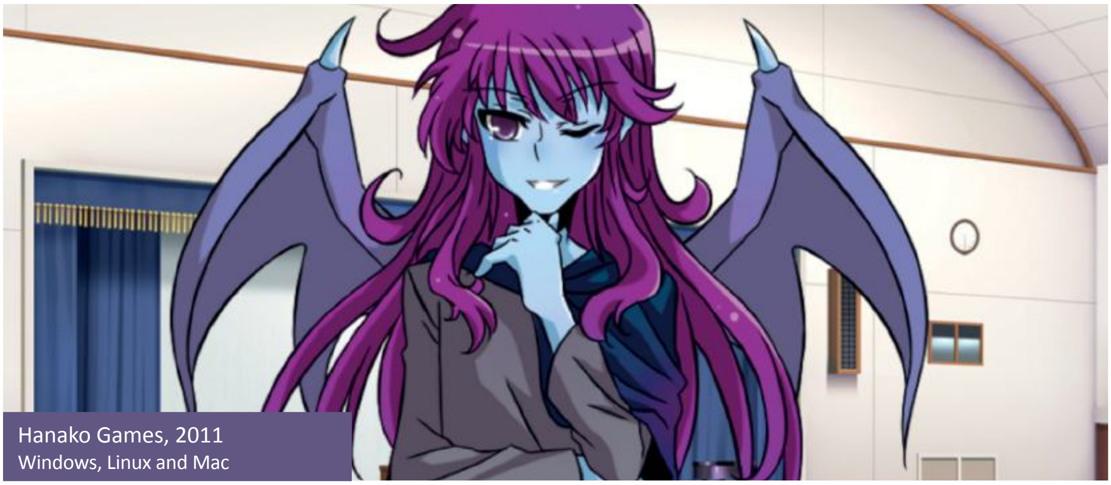
The Forgotten City: A fantastic new adventure about a city stuck in a time loop. Was released as a stand-alone game in 2021, earning several awards.

Vigilant: A fully-voiced *Dark Souls*-inspired adventure, with deadly fights against giant and challenging bosses.

SkyrimSE Re-Engaged ENB: ENBs are graphical mods that heavily alter the game's visuals, adding effects such as depth of field and ambient occlusion. There's hundreds of them, with *Re-Engaged* being the most popular, with over 1.5 million downloads.

If you want to heavily modify *Skyrim,* you can check several mod guides at the Skyrim reddit, or use Wabbajack to automatically download one of several curated list of mods.

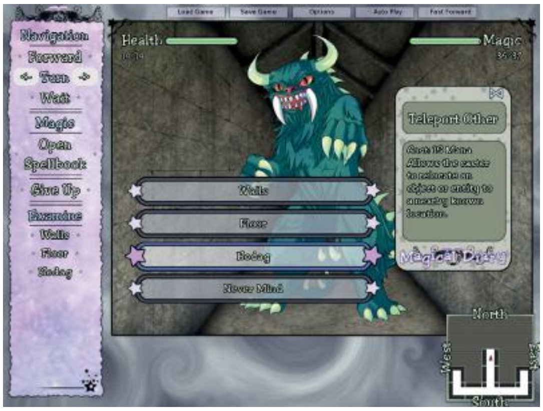
Magical Diary



Hanako Games, 2011
Windows, Linux and Mac

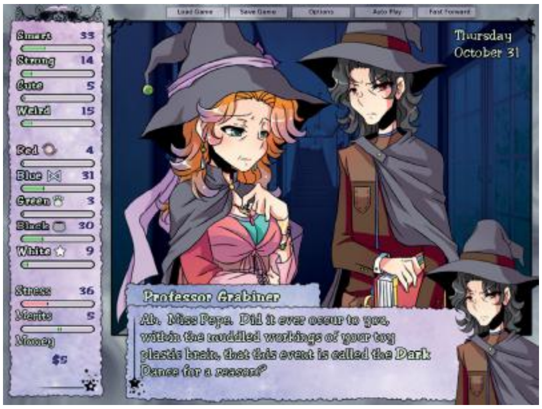
It's quite surprising how few *Harry Potter*-inspired games there are. Sure, there are licensed games that recreate the movies, but what *Magical Diary* does is far more interesting: it lets you create your own character and join a magical Hogwarts-like school, where you must attend classes, gain friends (or lovers) and try to survive school life. It's clearly inspired by *Princess Maker* (1991) and *Academagia* (2010), but with a more light-hearted and accessible presentation.

In 2020, a second game called *Magical Diary: Wolf Hall* was released, set in the same school but with a male wizard as the main character. The first game was renamed *Magical Diary: Horse Hall.*


Load Game
Save Game
Options
Auto Play
Fast Forward
Navigation
Forward
Turn
Wait
Magic
Open Spellbook
Give Up
Examine
Walls
Floor
Bodag
Health
Magic
Walls
Floor
Bodag
Never Mind
Teleport Other
Magical Diary
North
West
East
South

Cost 18 Mana
Allows the caster to relocate an object or entity to a nearby known location.

Using clever solutions, like teleporting a monster away instead of fighting it, awards you school merits


Load Game
Save Game
Options
Auto Play
Fast Forward
Smart 33
Strong 14
Cute 5
Weird 15
Red 4
Blue 31
Green 3
Black 30
White 9
Stress 36
Merits 5
Money
$5
Thursday
October 31

Professor Grabiner

Ah. Miss Pepe. Did it ever occur to you, within the muddled workings of your tiny plastic brain, that this event is called the Dark Dance for a reason?

Your character has four personality attributes – Smart, Strong, Cute and Weird; your choices will define your personality and open different options

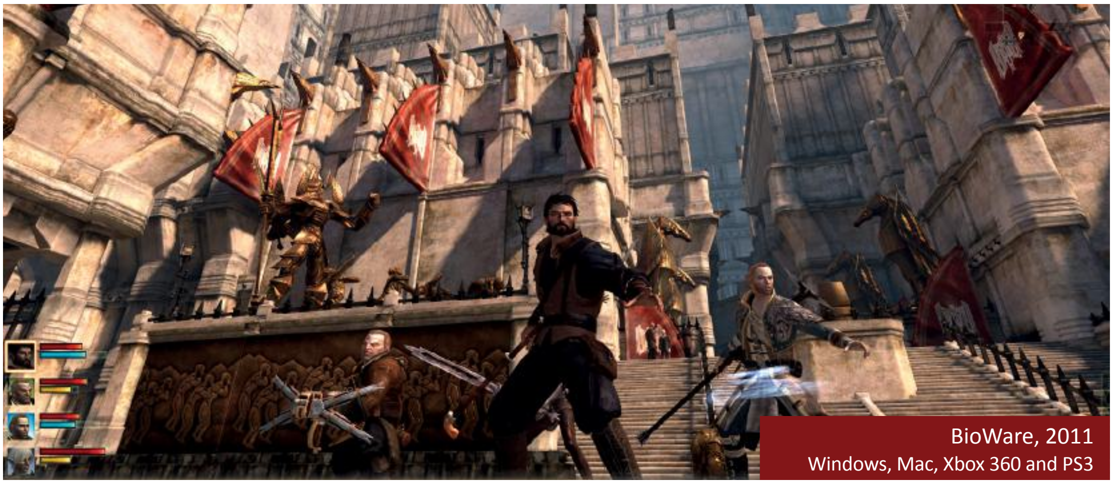
Magical Diary expertly combines visual novel tropes with RPG elements and a fascinating magic system. Each week you must decide your schedule, choosing which magic classes to attend. The game features five magic types, each with 12 spells, plus 16 combination spells that require points in two schools. So you're looking at over 70 spells to play with, such as Find Spirits, Anti-Magic Field and Stoneshape.

These can occasionally be used to solve (or cause) daily issues, like using a spell to cheat at the arcades. However, they really shine in the dungeons. Every month, you'll have to take tests that teleport you to a maze and require you to reach the exit. The challenges range from a monster hunting you to a race with a rival wizard, or just a big chasm to cross. And the solutions are all up to you. For example, to escape the monster you can kill it with damage spells, teleport it elsewhere, teleport yourself to the exit, distract it, scare it away, blind it, put it to sleep, turn invisible or even simply dig a tunnel across the maze. It's an extremely rich system that really feels like actual spellcasting, instead of simply shooting fireballs everywhere.

The big downside of *Magical Diary* is how short it is. Even slowly reading everything for the first time will take you only about five hours, and there's simply not enough room to explore its magical system. Many spells only have one use in-game, so you're likely to end without casting even half of your spellbook. The cast is also very small, with only two teachers in the entire school. Still, the game is quite replayable. It's fun to learn different spells to try new solutions on the dungeons, and the story can go into unexpected places depending on how you choose to act.

Don't let prejudice put you off; *Magical Diary* is a solid experience that brings a much-needed breath of fresh air into the genre. **FE**

Dragon Age II



BioWare, 2011
Windows, Mac, Xbox 360 and PS3

With the world-threatening invasion of the Blight solved by the player in *Dragon Age: Origins*, we now unexpectedly turn our sights to the lives of those affected by the war.

A quick glance at the concept of *Dragon Age II* and you'll be in awe at how ambitious it is. This is the tale of Hawke, a war refugee who's just arrived with his family at the dark city of Kirkwall, not a penny to his name. Over the coming years, he will have to find a way to survive not an inhuman ancient evil, but the worst of humanity itself – greedy slavers, racist nobles, religious zealots and a hateful mage-hunting inquisition. To crown it all, the story is told by an unreliable narrator: a sleazy companion of Hawke under interrogation by a mysterious woman.

Unfortunately, this bold premise was met with EA's demand for BioWare to release a game between *Mass Effect 2* and *3*. The team had little more than a year to make *Dragon Age II* – that they managed it is a small miracle, but a price was paid. While the art style is vastly improved, the game suffers heavily from re-used assets and locations, as well as cut features.

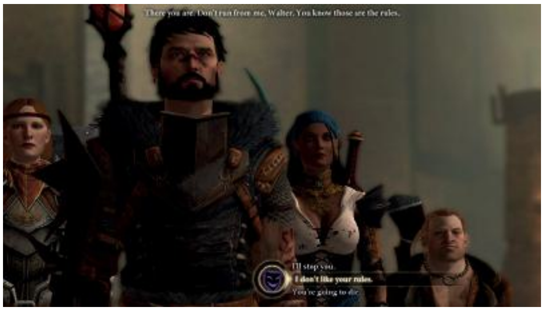
Simply put, a lot from the first game is missing. Gone are elves and dwarfs as playable races, the prestige classes, crafting, tactical view, non-combat skills and even your companion's armour. What's left is a more action-like combat system that has some interesting ideas – such as cross-class combos and friendship/rivalry talents – but that can get repetitive fast, as it's paired with poor level design and endless encounters that just spawn wave after wave of enemies.

With its gameplay so constrained, *DA2* lives or dies by its characters and story. The game spans a decade, showing Hawke's life alongside his family and friends in Kirkwall. Fans love some intimate moments and scenes, but the overall delivery doesn't do justice to its premise.

DA2 tries to build up conflicts over the years, but doesn't lay the groundwork and literally skips all hardships. The plot talks about poverty, persecution, and social unrest, but those are all told, not experienced. Of course, it is unrealistic to expect something like *Pathologic*, but it's still disappointing just how quickly Hawke becomes a rich and influential power fantasy hero, always in control and safe from consequences.

In the end, *Dragon Age II*'s saving grace is its companions – perhaps the most polarising cast in any BioWare game. Every player will love a few characters – and hate a few others. The ratio of this love/hate balance will determine if you will manage to endure the repetitive gameplay, see the character's stories through and consider it a worthwhile experience or not. **FE**

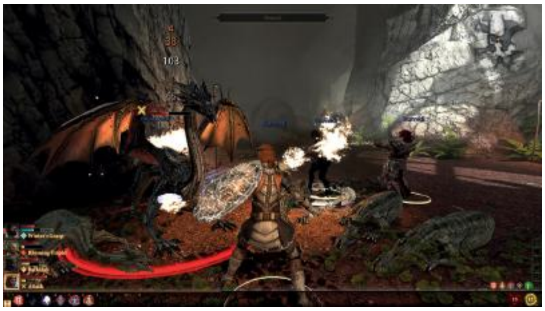
***Dragon Age II* got four story DLCs, which added three new companions. An expansion called *Exalted March* was planned, to provide closure for Hawke's story, but was later cancelled.**



There you are. Don't run from me, Walter. You know those are the rules.

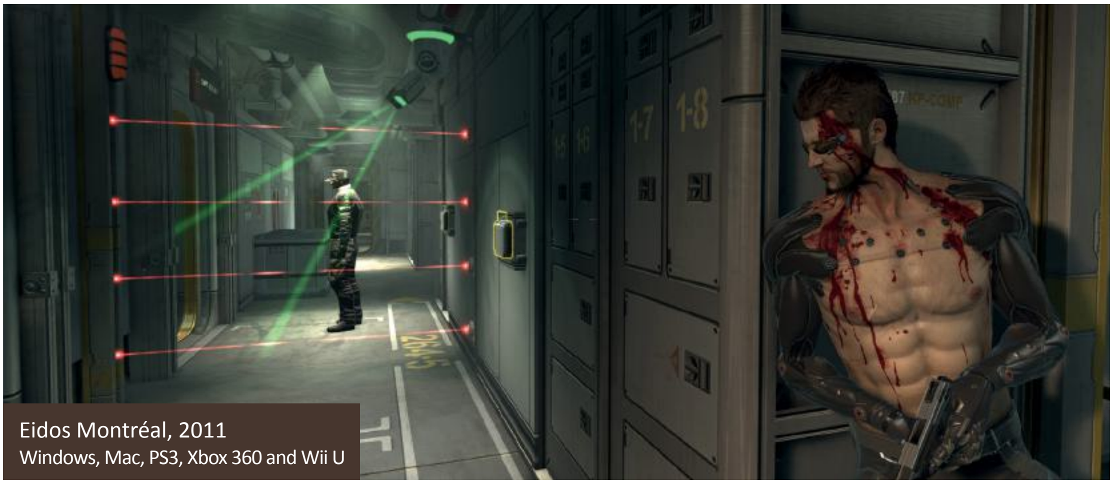
I'll stop you.
I don't like your rules.
You're going to die.

The dialogue wheel is similar to *Mass Effect*'s, but introduces a Humorous attitude, besides Diplomatic and Aggressive



DA2 is entirely set in the city of Kirkwall and its immediate surrounding areas; the heavy re-use of environments and enemies gets very repetitive after a while

Deus Ex:
Human Revolution

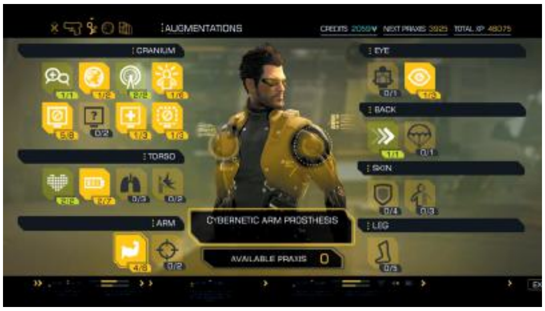


Eidos Montréal, 2011
Windows, Mac, PS3, Xbox 360 and Wii U

Deus Ex: Human Revolution had a lot going against it. It was the first game developed by Eidos Montréal, and none of its developers had worked on a *Deus Ex* before. *Invisible War* (2003), though well-received by critics and commercially successful, had been a heavily streamlined sequel poorly received by fans. When *HR* was announced by Square Enix, many expected the same, or worse.

The new developers, however, loved the original and wanted to stay faithful to its design, which proved to be a remarkable challenge. The first two years of development were focused on prototypes, as the team struggled to find the *Deus Ex* gameplay they wanted. Once found, the team ended up with only roughly two years to make the full game. This did cause issues, but it also makes its accomplishments look more impressive.

The team also wanted to preserve the series' story, so they made *HR* a prequel set in 2027, 25 years before the first game. The protagonist is Adam Jensen, chief of security at Sarif Industries, an advanced biotech company. After an attack at Sarif's HQ in Detroit by a group of mercenaries, Jensen suffers near-fatal wounds. The company then saves Jensen with the most advanced augmentations available, making him one of the most heavily augmented humans at the time.



Augmentations empower your playstyle, allowing you to move heavy objects, hack computers, see through walls, persuade NPCs and so on

One of the narrative's main influences is the myth of Icarus, featured in some of the trailers and the beautiful theme song. It's a theme seen in both *DX1* and *HR*, along with conspiracy theories, mega-corporations, surveillance, liberty, technological progress affecting social classes and more. The story suffers from a rushed ending, but its numerous themes are well-explored, and the side-missions do a good job of fleshing out the setting.

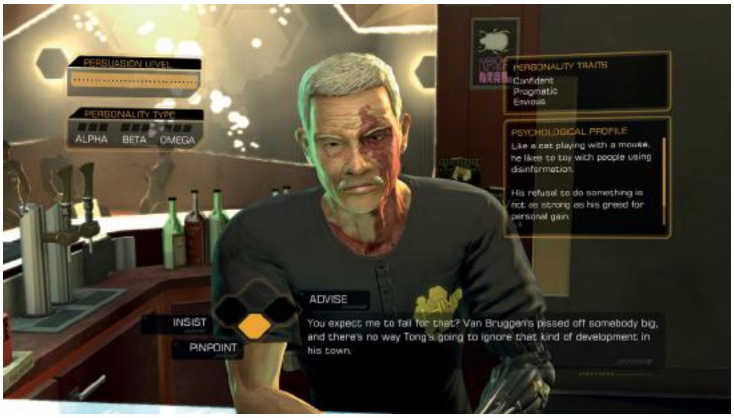
Human Revolution's gameplay follows the series' pillars: a versatile combination of FPS combat, stealth, exploration and social interaction, albeit differently executed. The level design also follows similar principles, but areas are less open-ended in favour of more detailed environments. A surprisingly good hacking mini-game was added and plays an important role, while the new dialogue system makes conversations play out like puzzles.

Combat as a whole is improved as well, but some mechanics can make it a bit too easy, mainly the cover system, takedowns and the XP system. The game is played in a first-person view, but entering cover switches it to a third-person camera, allowing players to peek around corners and see what's behind them. It's an optional tool, but many areas were designed around it, so some may find it awkward to avoid using it.

The takedown is the game's only melee attack. Available in lethal and non-lethal forms, it quickly neutralises any non-boss target (or two, with an upgrade) in a single attack, during which you cannot be detected or harmed. The game plays fine without it, so players wanting more challenge can ignore it entirely.

The game offers experience rewards for finishing a mission completely undetected and without raising alarms, but other rewards don't feel so appropriate.

> "Initially it was also very tough to convince the team to be totally on board, because you would have to go to them and say things like, 'OK, you have to work on this piece for the next two months, and only 30% of players are going to see that'. Most games have the philosophy of 'if we spend money and time on something, all players must see that'."
>
> *– Jean-François Dugas,* Deus Ex: Human Revolution*'s director*



Like a cat playing with a mouse, he likes to toy with people using disinformation.

His refusal to do something is not as strong as his greed for personal gain.

You expect me to fall for that? Van Bruggen's pissed off somebody big, and there's no way Tong's going to ignore that kind of development in his town.

Some dialogues are like puzzles, in which you must convince other characters to help you by observing their personalities

For example, hacking always gives XP, but using passwords you found doesn't. It's not a major issue, as you'll earn enough experience no matter how you play, but the game clearly favours specific playstyles and approaches. Similarly, *HR*'s most infamous flaw is its boss fights. Due to time constraints, they were outsourced to a different studio, and the result feels as out of place as it sounds. The player is forced to fight bullet-sponge enemies in small, closed areas, unlike all the other missions in the game.

Luckily, the game received a Director's Cut in 2013, which added stealth and hacking options to allow for more playstyles. It also added an extensive director's commentary and Making Of documentary, plus all the DLCs and slightly improved graphics.

Speaking of which, the game's aesthetic, heavily inspired by cyberpunk themes and the Renaissance, is perhaps its most memorable quality. These themes are strongly reflected in the character designs and environmental storytelling. The stark contrasts, mainly between gold and black, often resemble a chiaroscuro approach that sets a unique atmosphere.

The ever-present yellow filter was divisive, but was toned down in the Director's Cut. Overall it's an area where the game truly shines, and Michael McCann's excellent score makes it all even better.

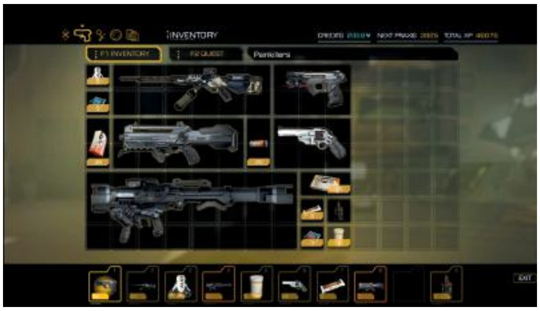
Judged by itself, *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* is one of the best AAA RPGs of the last decade. As a *Deus Ex* prequel, it falls short of the first game in some areas, but comes remarkably close. It is a rare triumph among its contemporaries. It teaches that a modern AAA reboot, despite being made by a new studio with none of the original creators, can find success and its own identity while staying faithful to its roots.

The same cannot be said about *Mankind Divided*, *HR*'s direct sequel, released in 2016. The graphics are prettier, hacking is more fun, and the hub area in Prague is very nice, but it's worse than its predecessor at just about everything else.

The level design is way too simple; the story feels like it was cut in half (possibly because Square Enix had plans for a trilogy); the writing has a lot more exposition; and the game as a whole is way too easy. To make it worse, they added micro-transactions to the campaign and a pay-to-win competitive mode.

Deus Ex: Human Revolution was a best-seller and won several Game of the Year awards. *Mankind Divided* was well-received by critics, but it didn't go down well with the public, resulting in underwhelming sales. Much like *Invisible War*, it did enough damage that the franchise was put on hold by Square Enix, tragically taking *Deus Ex* back into the fridge. **FAX**

According to a report by Jim Sterling, *Deux Ex: Mankind Divided* suffered heavily from publisher inference, with Square Enix ordering the inclusion of a pay-to-win competitive mode and, just weeks before release, asking for microtransactions to be added to the main game.



As in the original *Deus Ex*, the inventory is quite limited, forcing you to carefully choose which items to bring along

Mankind Divided includes a gorgeous and quite immersive re-creation of Prague, but the rest of the game is uninspired

Mass Effect 3

BioWare, 2012
Windows, PS3 and Xbox 360

In addition to difficulty levels, *Mass Effect 3* features Action and Story modes. The former changes dialogues into cinematics, while the latter makes combat extremely easy.

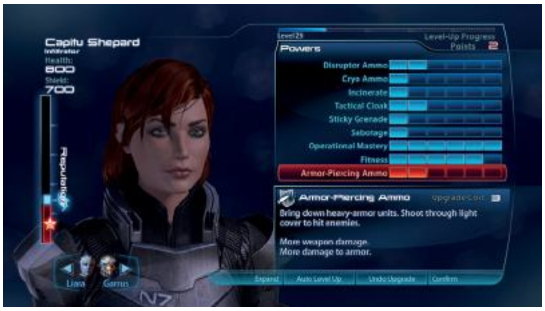
Streamlining the original *Mass Effect*'s gameplay systems allowed its sequel to reach much greater commercial and critical success, so it was only natural for the third game to follow the same path, which is exactly what happened.

Mass Effect 3 is a very iterative addition to the series, focusing on new content, polish, and refinement in certain aspects. It even introduces a fresh batch of lore inconsistencies to supplement those already present in *ME2*, and is equally shameless about this.

The story follows directly from *Mass Effect 2*'s final DLC (*Arrival*), with Commander Shepard grounded on Earth (having apparently returned to active duty for System Alliance after the Spectre and Cerberus episodes) and facing a hearing regarding the warnings of an imminent Reaper invasion – which the government still doubts is a threat or even exists!

Reapers show an ironic sense of humour and invade at this exact moment, forcing our hero to jump straight into action and once again travel across the galaxy in search of a way to defeat the enemy, as well as gathering allies and resources for a counter-attack.

As usual, Shepard is aided in this task by a team of trustworthy companions, who are a mix of old friends returning from previous games and a few new faces.



Bring down heavy-armor units. Shoot through light cover to hit enemies.

More weapon damage.
More damage to armor.

The character system remains similar to that of *Mass Effect 2*, but now most powers can branch into two different playstyles

While there are way fewer squad-mates than in *ME2*, they offer many skills to choose from and match to your personal tastes. Almost all companions are potential 'love interests', to the point where it seems this feature was a priority when deciding on the cast. Sadly, there's no Krogan party member this time.

Being the trilogy's finale, *Mass Effect 3* offers resolutions and follow-ups to various story arcs from previous games. Some of them are an impressive display of storytelling and attention to player choice, while others are somewhat lacklustre, with near-identical replacement characters showing up to take the place of those who did not survive. Still, the sheer amount of effort put into creating a coherent player-affected narrative between the three games warrants respect.

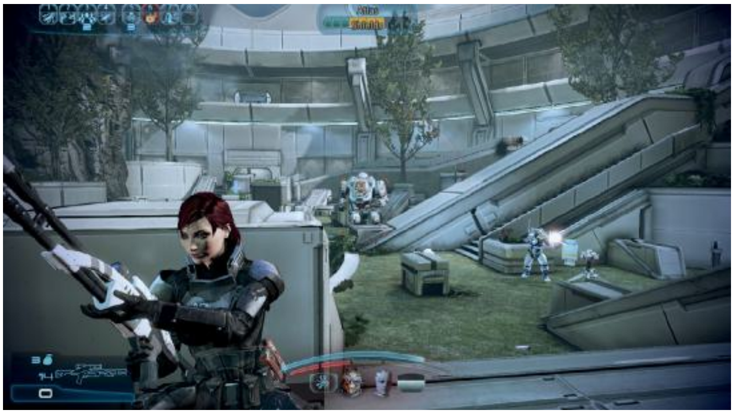
However, it's impossible to defend some plot points, especially Cerberus' ridiculous omnipresence and Shepard's unexplainable plan to stop the Reapers. The contrivances felt in *ME2* are back in force, as the game often ignores previously established concepts or forces players to helplessly watch certain events.

Gameplay-wise, *Mass Effect 3* is basically the same as *ME2*, but more polished in every way. The action part feels better than ever with gunplay easily on par with that of contemporary shooters, and a variety of characters' abilities introducing another layer to the combat dynamic. All the classes have been changed and rebalanced, encouraging players to try out new builds and allowing for vastly different playstyles.

In addition, Shepard is now much less restricted when it comes to loadout, as every class is able to use every weapon. Weapons can also be customised by modifying them with various components, such as extended magazines or accuracy-improving scopes. These welcome changes allow for some very interesting and fun combinations of guns and abilities.

"*Mass Effect* has been a shared experience between the development team and our fans – not just a shared experience in playing the games, but in designing and developing them. An outpouring of love for Garrus and Tali led to their inclusion as love interests in *ME2*. A request for deeper RPG systems led to key design changes in *ME3*."

– Casey Hudson,
Mass Effect series' executive producer



Enemies now have several abilities and will throw grenades, deploy turrets, use shields, buff allies and pilot mechs – which you can steal for yourself

Level design is a noticeable improvement over the linear corridors of *ME2*. There are more open spaces, alternative paths and optional branches, which usually net a loot cache or additional story elements like datalogs (though the hacking and bypass mini-games were entirely removed). Sets of chest-high walls and crates are also less obvious this time, so you are not immediately alerted of an incoming firefight.

All this makes the walking-around experience more enjoyable, not just downtime between combat and dialogue. Environments are visually impressive, with some truly awe-inspiring backgrounds, from beautiful alien cities to war-torn battlefields.

The audio layer is worth mentioning too, with music created by several composers, led by Hollywood veteran Clint Mansell, and sound design rewarding playing the game with good audio setups. The voice acting is also superb, as per series tradition.

ME3 caused a certain controversy on launch, due to one important squad member being locked behind a "Day 1" DLC (*From Ashes*), which is (to this day) not included with the base version of the game. Fans of the series will definitely want to play the third game with this and other DLCs, especially the final one (*Citadel*), which serves as a send-off for Shepard and will cause a surge of memories from previous games.

ME3 also adds separate multiplayer missions, tied to the in-game galactic war. By playing these missions (or the *Mass Effect: Infiltrator* game for iOS), players earn additional "war assets" that are used in the single-player campaign, influencing its outcome.

Regardless, the game's – and therefore the whole trilogy's – ending(s) were deemed unsatisfactory by many and led to an online uproar. BioWare later released a free DLC (*Extended Cut*) addressing these concerns, but some fans still consider it a letdown.

The *Mass Effect* trilogy stands as a landmark. While some will always be disappointed by the (many) unfulfilled promises, its successful blend of a cinematic action RPG with strong squad member relationship elements ensured the direction of future BioWare games – and of many other RPGs. **WM**

After only featuring a male Shepard in *ME1* and *2*'s cover and promo material, BioWare held a vote to choose the official female Shepard. She was voted a redhead by 19k fans, and so *ME3*'s box came with a two-sided cover art – one male, the other female.

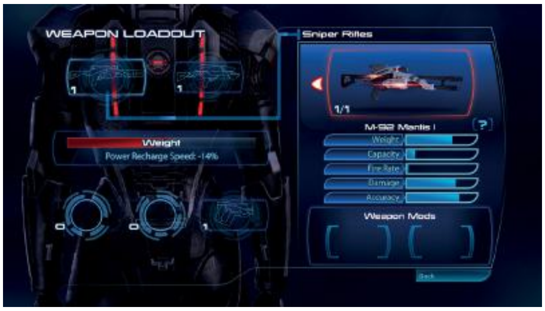
Mods:

Expanded Galaxy Mod: Adds new features, events, items and several extra missions across the galaxy.

ME3Recalibrated: An unofficial patch, it addresses many bugs, as well as some lore inconsistencies.

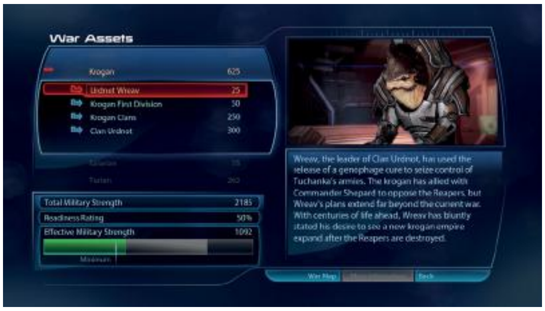
MEHEM: Gives the game a different, happier ending.

A Lot of Textures: A large pack with new HD textures.



Weight
Power Recharge Speed: -14%

Weapon mods are back, and you can now customise your loadout, restricted only by the weight limit of each class



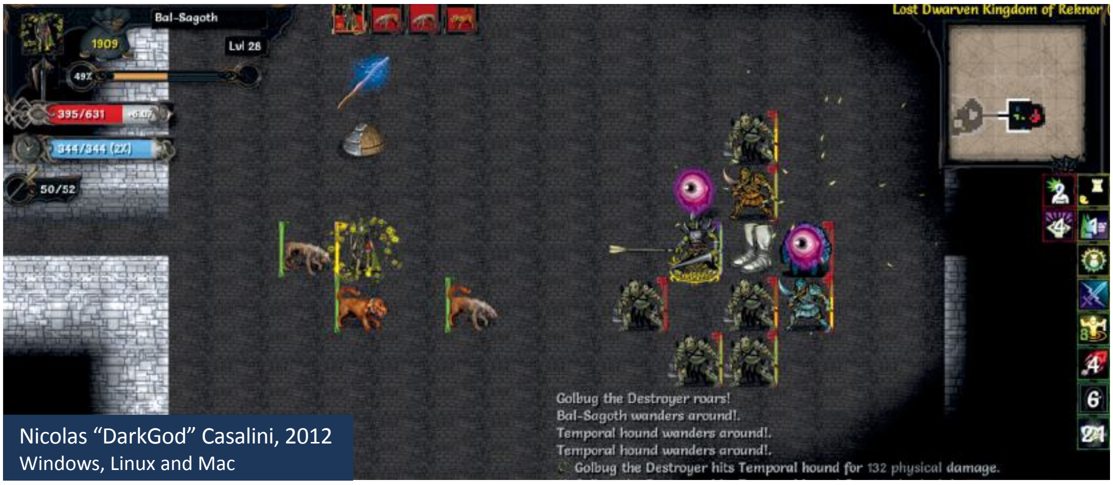
Krogan 625
Urdnot Wreav 25
Krogan First Division 50
Krogan Clans 250
Clan Urdnot 300

Total Military Strength 2185
Readiness Rating 50%
Effective Military Strength 1092

Wreav, the leader of Clan Urdnot, has used the release of a genophage cure to seize control of Tuchanka's armies. The krogan has allied with Commander Shepard to oppose the Reapers, but Wreav's plans extend far beyond the current war. With centuries of life ahead, Wreav has bluntly stated his desire to see a new krogan empire expand after the Reapers are destroyed.

The endings change depending on how many war assets you gathered, either in missions or in the multiplayer

Tales of Maj'Eyal



Golbug the Destroyer roars!
Bal-Sagoth wanders around!.
Temporal hound wanders around!.
Temporal hound wanders around!.
Golbug the Destroyer hits Temporal hound for 132 physical damage.

Nicolas "DarkGod" Casalini, 2012
Windows, Linux and Mac

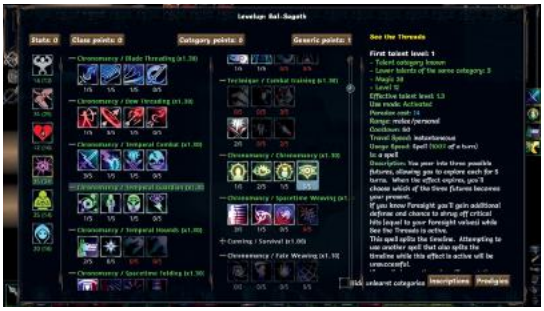
Tales of Maj'Eyal **is open-source and freely available for download, but it's also for sale on Steam and GOG, with its two recent expansions requiring a donation or purchase.**

Since I first heard about Roguelikes, I've always wanted to love them. The concept of highly complex RPGs with infinite, randomly-generated adventures was exciting, but I never felt fully satisfied playing *ADOM, NetHack, Angband, Brogue* and other classic Roguelikes. Something was missing.

More than nice graphics or a friendly interface, I missed a sense of place – all those carefully hand-placed details that give a special quality to dungeons, towns, quests and NPCs – that offer interesting goals and tease cleverly hidden secrets for players to pursue.

Luckily, I found all that I wanted in *Tales of Maj'Eyal.* Also known as *ToME4*, its development began back in 1998 as *Tales of Middle-Earth* (or *ToME1)*. A variant of the classic Roguelike *Angband*, it was constantly expanded for over a decade until 2012, when the team decided to release a fourth major version that replaced the Tolkien-based setting with an original one and changed the name to *Tales of Maj'Eyal*.

At a quick glance, one can already see several differences from traditional Roguelikes – instead of ASCII graphics, *ToME* uses charming 2D graphics and an accessible, mouse-driven interface. However, the biggest difference is how it blends the Roguelike formula with more traditional CRPG bits, becoming an "RPG/Roguelike hybrid", if that makes sense.



There are six main stats and each class has its own unique skill trees, but extra skills (even from other classes) can be unlocked by performing special quests

For example, there's still permadeath, but you can disable it or play in Adventure mode, in which you can die a few times before your character is erased.

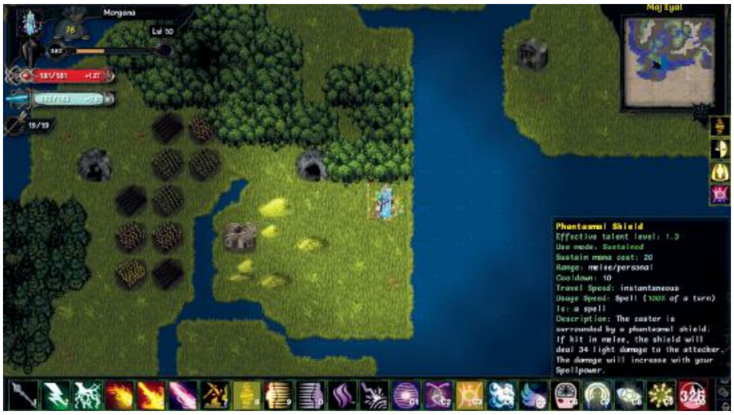
ToME also makes selective use of randomness. Its world map, towns, NPCs and quests are fixed, allowing for a quality far beyond that of traditional Roguelikes. It even offers choices and consequences: there's a faction that hates magic due to past events and will attack magic-users on sight – but also share secret anti-magic techniques if your character renounces magic forever. Another option is to ally yourself with renegade mages and destroy said faction.

Dungeons blend random layouts, enemies and treasures with fixed themes, key rooms and bosses. This gives them a lot of personality – you'll follow giant sandworms as they dig tunnels, battle in space, free slaves, dive underwater, race against time, etc.

Another unusual mechanic is how most races and classes have unique starting points and quests, but must be unlocked first. Say you start as a Dwarf Berserker – you'll begin your adventures in the Dwarven kingdom, learn about their culture, do some race- and class-specific quests, then venture into the world map. If you're lucky, by the time you die, you'll have done something special and unlocked a new race or class, and can now, for example, play as an Elven Archmage, which starts in a different area and has different quests.

The game currently has 16 races and 35 classes, offering several widely different playstyles. Each class has a set of skill trees that slowly unlocks as you level up, providing direct damage skills and passive bonuses, but there are also many "utility" abilities: teleporting, redirecting damage, raising walls, magic shields, etc. Instead of random potions and scrolls, you're given a clearly defined set of versatile tools and must manage their resources and cool-downs wisely.

> "To me, accessible means that any player should be able to start the game and feel at home as fast as possible. In this day and age, this means having mouse control, tooltips, hotkeys and so on. The user should never have to fight the UI, it's the UI that should adapt. But behind the simple UI is hidden a beast. I tend to describe *ToME* as a tactical RPG Roguelike."
>
> – *Nicolas "DarkGod" Casalini,* Tales of Maj'Eyal*'s creator*



```
Phantasmal Shield
Effective talent level: 1.3
Use mode: Sustained
Sustain mana cost: 20
Range: melee/personal
Cooldown: 10
Travel Speed: instantaneous
Usage Speed: Spell (100% of a turn)
Is: a spell
Description: The caster is
surrounded by a phantasmal shield.
If hit in melee, the shield will
deal 34 light damage to the attacker.
The damage will increase with your
Spellpower.
```

The main towns and dungeons are always in the same place on the world map, but there are random optional areas and roaming parties of NPCs

This gives *ToME* a very rare quality, which I love: true power comes not from big numbers, but from versatility. A Chronomancer can split time, test multiple tactics for a few turns and then choose the timeline that works better; a Doombringer can take an enemy with him into a demonic plane to duel; a Necromancer can perform a dark ritual to turn into a Lich and avoid (perma)death once, and so on.

It's a game that's always challenging (partly due to enemies level-scaling up), but building a good mix of abilities and equipment that can provide tactical options is far more important than min-maxing stats.

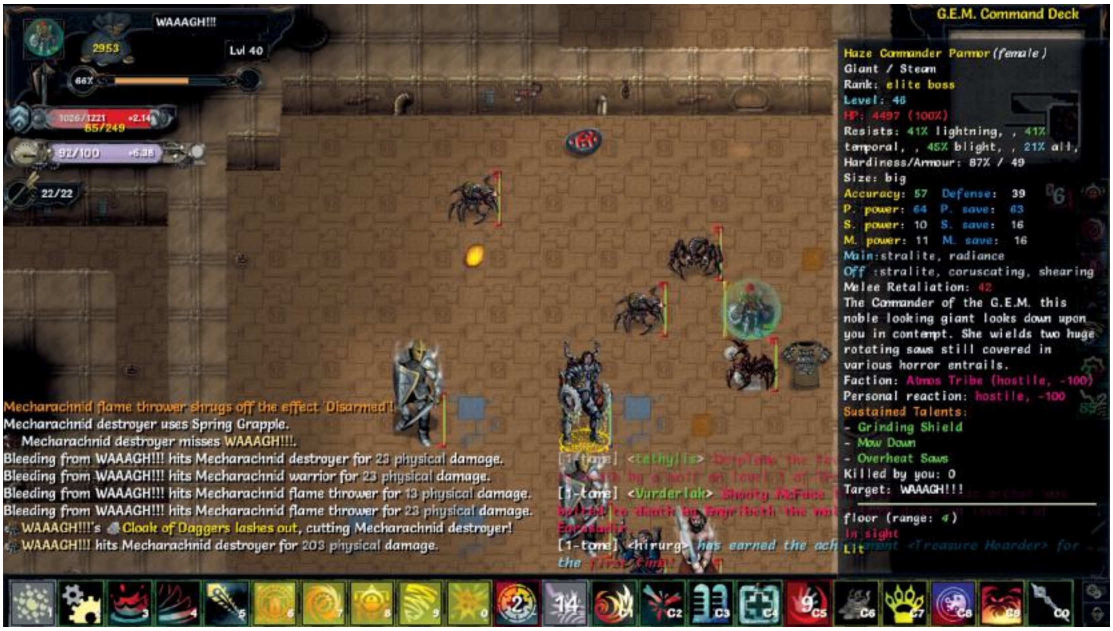
If unlocking new classes and races, trying new quest solutions and following the main story isn't enough to keep you motivated, *ToME* also offers over 1,700 achievements to pursue and special online events – you might be happily playing, when a developer appears and opens a portal to a mysterious plane!

The game is still in constant development, with new features and expansions being introduced. *Ashes of Urh'Rok* (2014) and *Forbidden Cults* (2018) added more content to the main campaign, but the real attraction is *Embers of Rage* (2016), which adds an entirely new campaign in which you play as Orcs and their allies, using technology like pistols and steam-powered saw-blades, as well as a new crafting system.

ToME also has an Infinite Dungeon mode and an Arena mode for those who care more about fighting, so you can see why it's a game I've spent hundreds of hours playing – and will keep playing.

If classic Roguelikes never felt satisfying for you, or even if you're a long-time veteran, I recommend trying *Tales of Maj'Eyal*. You can get the basic version for free on the official website, but this is a game that has more content, creativity and passion than most big-budget RPGs out there. Don't miss it. **FE**

There are several fan-made add-ons for download at *ToME*'s website and on Steam Workshop, adding new races, classes, UI improvements and translations into Chinese and Japanese.

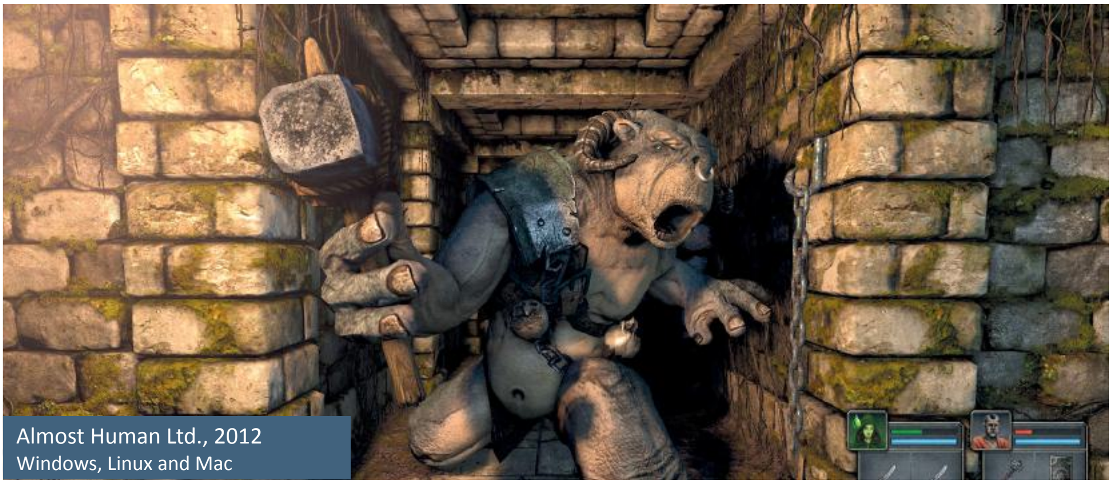


```
Mecharachnid flame thrower shrugs off the effect 'Disarmed'!
Mecharachnid destroyer uses Spring Grapple.
 Mecharachnid destroyer misses WAAAGH!!!.
Bleeding from WAAAGH!!! hits Mecharachnid destroyer for 23 physical damage.
Bleeding from WAAAGH!!! hits Mecharachnid warrior for 23 physical damage.
Bleeding from WAAAGH!!! hits Mecharachnid flame thrower for 13 physical damage.
Bleeding from WAAAGH!!! hits Mecharachnid flame thrower for 23 physical damage.
 WAAAGH!!!'s Cloak of Daggers lashes out, cutting Mecharachnid destroyer!
 WAAAGH!!! hits Mecharachnid destroyer for 203 physical damage.
```

```
Haze Commander Parmor (female)
Giant / Steam
Rank: elite boss
Level: 46
HP: 4497 (100%)
Resists: 41% lightning, , 41%
temporal, , 45% blight, , 21% all,
Hardiness/Armour: 87% / 49
Size: big
Accuracy: 57  Defense:  39
P. power: 64  P. save:  63
S. power: 10  S. save:  16
M. power: 11  M. save:  16
Main:stralite, radiance
Off :stralite, coruscating, shearing
Melee Retaliation: 42
The Commander of the G.E.M. this
noble looking giant looks down upon
you in contempt. She wields two huge
rotating saws still covered in
various horror entrails.
Faction: Atmos Tribe (hostile, -100)
Personal reaction: hostile, -100
Sustained Talents:
- Grinding Shield
- Mow Down
- Overheat Saws
Killed by you: 0
Target: WAAAGH!!!
floor (range: 4)
In sight
Lit
```

ToME is a highly tactical Roguelike, which gives players many versatile abilities and plenty of information, and tests them against all sorts of challenges, both random and fixed

Legend of Grimrock


Almost Human Ltd., 2012
Windows, Linux and Mac

When the indie game scene took off in 2008, I was hoping that some of the abandoned game genres from yesteryear might make a comeback. To my surprise, a group of Finns were thinking just that and made *Legend of Grimrock*, a game that honours the real-time grid-based dungeon crawlers (a.k.a. blobbers) from back in the day.

In terms of game design and UI mechanics, *Grimrock* picks up exactly where games like *Stonekeep* and *Anvil of Dawn* left off in the mid-'90s, and then adds some new tricks of its own. The de-facto standards of a full-screen view, minimal UI, inbuilt automap and easy inventory management are all present, but then today's standards of graphics and sound are added. Realistic lights and shadows, full animations for the monsters and even a Freelook view.

For someone like me, who grew up playing many of the predecessors to *Grimrock*, this felt like an old dream coming true: playing an archaic game genre with modern-day luxuries.

The plot is simple and non-intrusive: your party is comprised of convicts who are thrown into the eponymous mountain prison with the promise that your escape will grant you amnesty for your crimes.

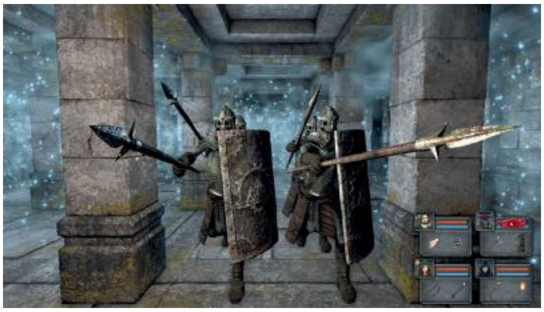
A voice that speaks in your dreams urges you to come find it at the bottom of the mountain, and you'll soon find journal pages by an adventurer who came before you. For once, the world doesn't need saving; it's just a personal quest for freedom through a well-crafted dungeon filled with puzzles and monsters.

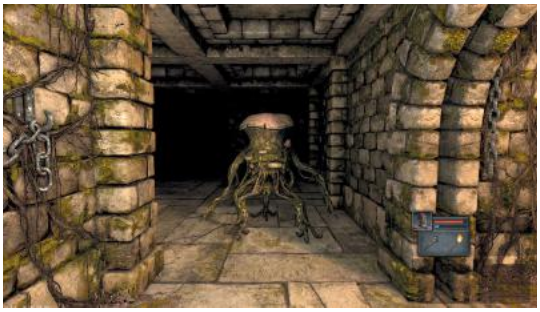
The game goes for the classical "four party members" approach, but its bare-bones character creation system is somewhat disappointing. With only four races and three classes, three of the races are custom-tailored towards each of the classes and then humans are thrown in as all-rounders.

Further customisation is gained through the skill system, where there are plenty of skills to learn but not enough skill points to go round. As a result, Fighters will have to choose a preferred weapon and Mages must pick a preferred school of magic. Obviously they could have done better with both systems, but it works as is.

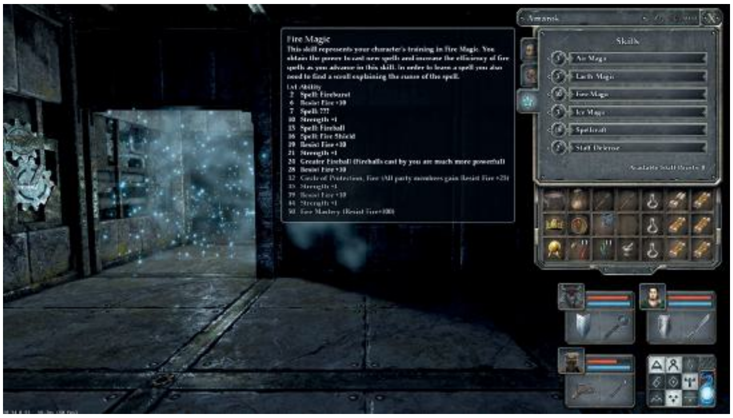
Another valid point of criticism is the interface. Its minimal approach is a good thing, but its tiny size leads to many unwanted misclicks, especially with the keypad-esque spell interface, where players must input specific rune combinations to cast spells.

In January 2014, a live-action web series based on *Legend of Grimrock* was funded on Kickstarter, to be made by the team responsible for *Nuka Break*. Sadly, the project was never concluded.


While not a very difficult game, *Grimrock* makes clever use of enemies and traps to create elaborate puzzles


There's a secret mode in which you can enter the dungeon alone as Toorun, a unique all-round character

> "We feel that puzzles and also party-based gameplay to some extent are lacking in modern RPGs, and this is one of the factors that led to the development of *Grimrock*. But, more importantly, we are huge fans of the genre and can't bear that these types of awesome games are not made anymore. So, clearly somebody had to step in and do something."
>
> – *Petri Häkkinen, Almost Human co-founder*


Fire Magic

This skill represents your character's training in Fire Magic. You obtain the power to cast new spells and increase the efficiency of fire spells as you advance in this skill. In order to learn a spell you also need to find a scroll explaining the runes of the spell.

Lvl Ability
2 Spell: Fireburst
6 Resist Fire +10
7 Spell: ???
10 Strength +1
15 Spell: Fireball
16 Spell: Fire Shield
19 Resist Fire +10
21 Strength +1
25 Greater Fireball (Fireballs cast by you are much more powerful)
28 Resist Fire +10
32 Circle of Protection: Fire (All party members gain Resist Fire +25)
35 Strength +1
39 Resist Fire +10
44 Strength +1
50 Fire Mastery (Resist Fire +100)

Mages not only have to spend skill points to master the various schools of magic, but also need to know the correct rune input, usually found in scrolls

One problem that has plagued games of this ilk from the beginning is how easy it is to trivialise combat with the so-called "combat mambo". Attack a monster, then quickly sidestep and turn to face where the monster will move. Repeat until it dies.

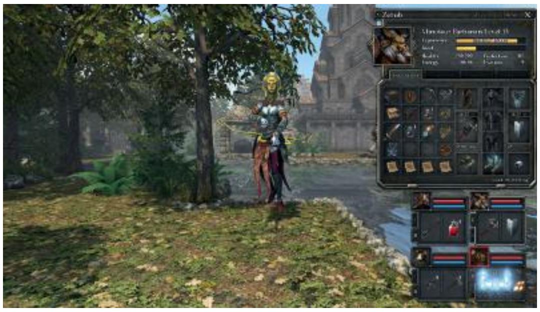
Past games tried various monster AI routines, which *Grimrock* also does but then goes one further and subtly builds the levels around the monster's strengths, giving them a home-field advantage.

The game feels lonely at times, as there is no one around to talk to, but this benefits the overall atmosphere as the sense of isolation adds an element of survival to the game, making players rely more on their supplies and the game's crafting system.

Legend of Grimrock turned out to be a surprise hit, selling nearly one million units and paying for its development in less than a week. A sequel was therefore inevitable, and *Legend of Grimrock II* roared onto the scene in 2014. Instead of a mountain prison, the party is now stranded on a remote island, allowing for non-linear exploration in every direction.

The sequel is superior to the original in almost every sense, adding underwater areas, boss battles, smarter monsters and a stronger emphasis on vertical movement … and yet it somehow failed to rival the impact (and sales) of the first game.

The *Grimrock* games are first and foremost a homage to a school of game design that is considered outdated, but clearly not unwanted. Already, several games have tried to cash in on their success by riding in their wake, but so far none have matched them. It's not often that one game can revive an entire gaming sub-genre, but that's exactly what *Legend of Grimrock* did. **ÁV**



The second game is set on a remote island, offering a huge non-linear dungeon-crawler surrounded by gorgeous vistas

Fan-Made Dungeons:

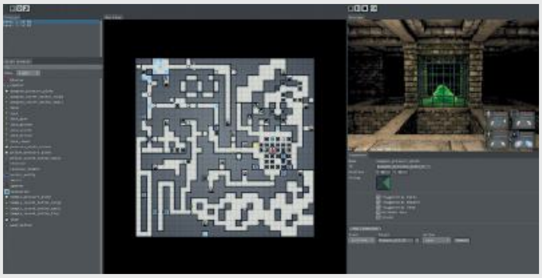
One of *Grimrock*'s high points is the dungeon editor. As grid-based dungeons are easy to plan and build, there have been plenty of fan-made dungeons made, especially for the first game. Here are some highlights:

The Master Quest: The first game's campaign with extra content. Works very well and is highly enjoyable.

Mines of Malan Vael: A short dungeon with a new mine tileset. Find out why all the workers in a mine have disappeared.

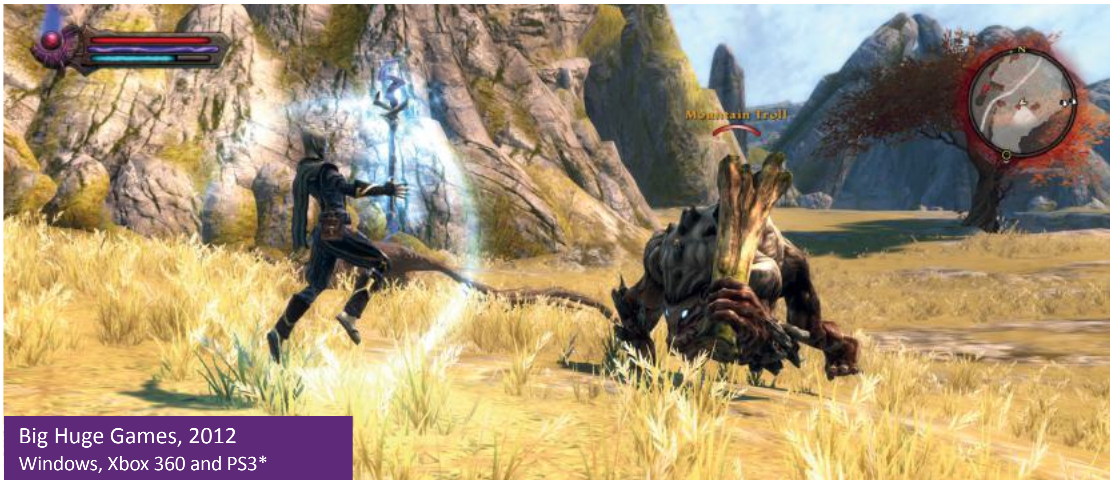
The Master Key: A dungeon that's heavily inspired by *Dungeon Master*, a nice mixture of puzzles and combat. The author also did a dungeon based on *Chaos Strikes Back*, but it's not as enjoyable as this one.

The Forbidden Halls: Your party discovers some abandoned halls and decides to explore them. It features some odd and annoying additions, but overall it's quite enjoyable.



The level editor is easy to understand and provides a great deal of freedom when in able hands

Kingdoms of Amalur: Reckoning



Big Huge Games, 2012
Windows, Xbox 360 and PS3*

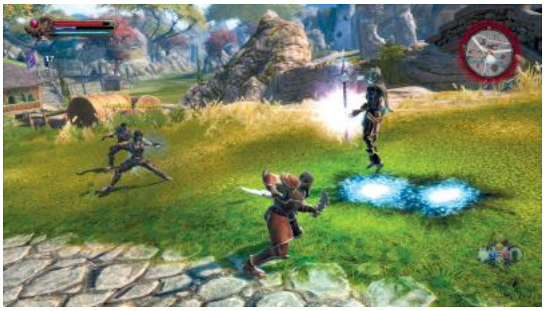
***The game was re-released in 2020 as *Kingdoms of Amalur: Re-Reckoning*, with upgraded graphics, a few balance changes and new ports for PS4, Xbox One and Switch.**

During the low-risk, heavily consolidated AAA development scenario of the 2010s, it was increasingly rare for companies to invest in new IPs. Small projects aside, almost every AAA title was a sequel, reboot, spin-off or spiritual successor.

As such, *Kingdoms of Amalur: Reckoning* took the world by surprise. Not only was it an original IP, but it was helmed by a dream team: Ken Rolston (lead designer on *Morrowind* and *Oblivion*), Todd McFarlane (founder of Image Comics and creator of *Spawn*) and R.A. Salvatore, the best-selling fantasy author famous for his Drizzt Do'Urden novels.

Behind this ambitious super-project was retired baseball player Curt Schilling, who founded his own game development company (38 Studios), purchased Big Huge Games from THQ and then secured a loan of 75 million dollars from the US state of Rhode Island to develop *Amalur* and a tie-in MMORPG.

With R.A. Salvatore creating an original setting and McFarlane directing the art style, Rolston set out to create a new brand of open-world RPG. He envisioned a game that offered Bethesda's expansive worlds, BioWare's narratives and Blizzard's addictive progression systems, but focused on fast-paced action combat inspired by games like *God of War*.



Amalur is very reminiscent of *Fable*, especially in the art style, but the camera has a narrow FOV and tilts down, focusing more on the floor than on the environment

The game begins with your character dead. Then they get better. This rather *Planescape: Torment*-ish event removes you from the Wheel of Fate and allows you to interfere with other people's destinies. But don't expect deep philosophical dilemmas – you can basically kill people before they were fated to die.

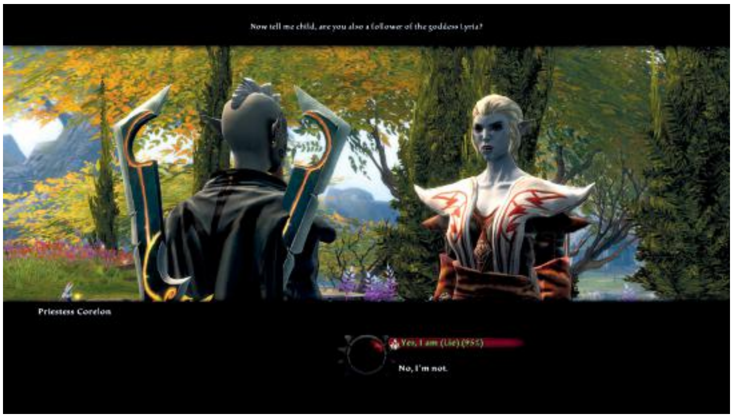
To do this, *Amalur* offers a variety of weapons, spells and skills, divided into three classic archetypes – Might, Finesse and Sorcery. Every level-up, you get three points to spend on the archetypal skill trees. You can mix them however you wish, and the game reacts to that by unlocking "destiny" bonuses you can equip. For example, investing six points in Might and six points in Sorcery gives you the Guardian destiny, which boosts defence and converts damage into mana.

Combat is really the meat of the game, and it's a satisfying blend of arcade action and RPG. You equip two weapons at once, each assigned to a button (a controller is advised), and you can freely mix their attacks. The nine weapon types all play very differently and there are several moves at your disposal – dodges, parries, timed blocks, 3-hit combos, charge attacks, delayed attacks, damage spells, sustained buffs, traps, summons, etc. You can also sneak and backstab unsuspecting foes, though it isn't often useful.

The enemy variety isn't big, but they all have very distinct moves and skills. And, to seal the deal, *Amalur* uses a *Diablo*-like loot system, with random items of several qualities, legendary unique items, sets, gems and even a salvage and crafting system. It isn't deep, as the item bonuses lack diversity, but it's addictive.

Sadly, the game's balance is severely lacking. Combat is a cakewalk unless you play on Hard, and even then the respawning monsters and huge number of side-quests means you'll eventually become too powerful and breeze through it. A shame, really.

> "A good RPG has four aspects – exploration, narrative, advancement and then combat. And, as it turns out, for the first three things, people have been doing a pretty good job with them. But the combat … we really just haven't been asking enough of ourselves with that and haven't really known what an alternative would be. So, we decided; the world needs an RPG with good immersive combat."
>
> *– Ken Rolston,*
> Amalur*'s design director*



Now tell me child, are you also a follower of the goddess Lyria?

Priestess Corelon

Yes, I am (Lie) (95%)

No, I'm not.

Choices you make can unlock unique "destiny" bonuses, but both the dialogue system and the rare use of the persuasion skill are very simplistic

Even though unbalanced, *Amalur*'s combat is fun and the progression system is solid. What doomed it was the decision to favour quantity over quality, delivering a 200-hour RPG that plays like a single-player MMO.

Amalur's world is massive, packed full of quests. But, while you can go almost anywhere from the start, it feels railroaded and limited. You can't jump, areas are surrounded by jarring walls, dungeons are linear and quests are very simplistic, lacking any sense of scale. For example, you're sent to find the Theatre of Fate – a legendary place most people don't even believe exists – yet all you really do is exit town and follow a short road, guided by the all-knowing quest compass.

The NPCs are also poorly done. Entirely devoid of personality, they are mere quest dispensers and lore encyclopaedias, ready to dump monotonous lines on how Gadflow, the Unseelie King, ordered his Tuatha Deohn to destroy the Dokkalfar and please Tirnoch … It's uncanny how the lore is both incredibly generic and dense, making it almost impossible to care about.

Non-combat skills like Persuasion and Lockpick try to diversify the gameplay, and you can also own houses, steal, pickpocket, kill NPCs, get arrested, etc. However, it's all very limited and robotic, closer to the small-scale artificiality of *Fable* than to the immersive living world Ken Rolston created in *Morrowind*.

Still, Rolston made his point. *Amalur*'s combat is much more satisfying and deeper than that of rivals such as *Skyrim* or the Dragon Age and Witcher games, highlighting a flaw in modern RPGs. Its arcade-like gameplay isn't tied to the narrative, as in the Gothic and Souls series, but the mix of satisfying arcade combat with a massive open world is thrilling.

Sadly, any chances of a sequel improving the formula are long dead. While *Amalur* sold over a million copies, 38 Studios had severe management issues trying to develop a tie-in MMORPG and the company filed for bankruptcy shortly after.

Kingdoms of Amalur: Reckoning is easy, limited, unpolished and often dull. But it offered something fresh, that no other open-world RPG did. That is, until *Dragon's Dogma* came along two months later … **FE**

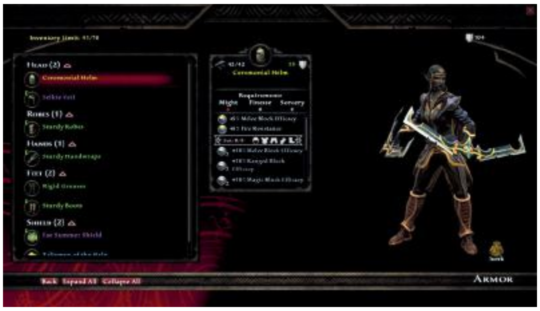
Alongside *Amalur*, 38 Studios were developing an MMO using the same setting. The game was in development for six years, but was cancelled when the company went bankrupt. You can read about it in Jason Schreier's book *Press Reset: Ruin and Recovery in the Video Game Industry*.

Mods:

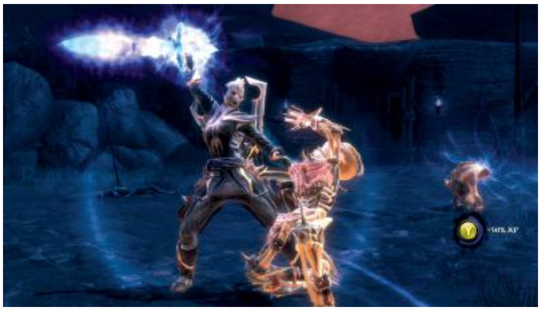
Widescreen Fixer: Allows you to increase the game's extremely narrow FOV and zoom out the camera.

HeartCore (a.k.a. YSA) Mod: A Cheat Engine file, it makes the game harder by nerfing your hero, decreasing XP, buffing enemies and speeding the game up to 115%.

Reckoning Remapping Tool: Greatly improves the poor port job on the keyboard and mouse controls.

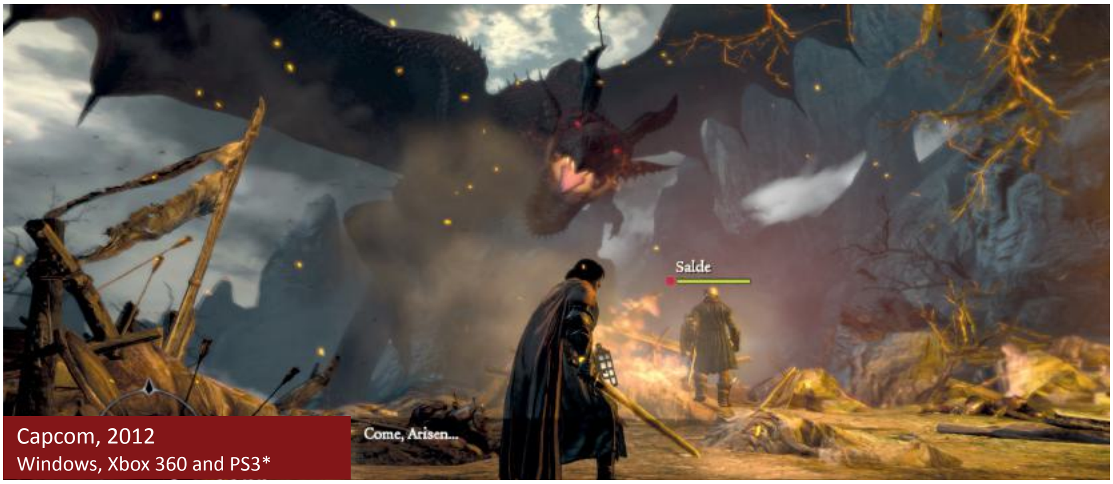


The *Diablo*-like loot is addictive, with some cool-looking unique weapons; sadly, their bonuses are all very similar



A special bar fills up as you fight, allowing you to slow down time, power your attacks and execute foes for an XP bonus

Dragon's Dogma



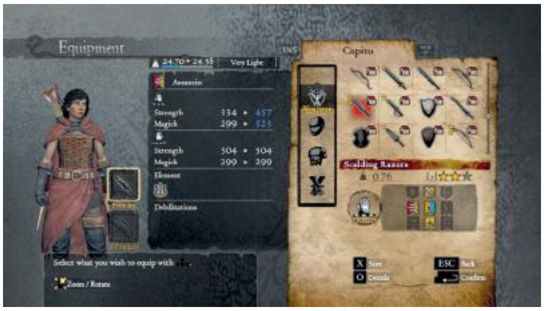
Capcom, 2012
Windows, Xbox 360 and PS3*

****Dragon's Dogma* was released in 2012 for consoles. The *Dark Arisen* version came in 2013, and in 2016 Capcom finally ported the game to PCs. The PS4 and Xbox One versions were released in 2017.**

Your lantern sputters to half-lit status, only dimly illuminating the massive form of the cyclops as it lurches towards your party. Hearing your fighter pawn yell, you move closer and allow yourself to be launched into the air, grabbing hold of the cyclops' arm and climbing to its armoured head. As the cyclops swipes at you, it misses and knocks its helmet to the ground below. Your mage pawn casts a flame enchantment on your strider pawn, who takes the opportunity to shoot an arrow straight into its eye. Welcome to *Dragon's Dogma*.

The heart of *DD* is its action-based combat system, and the interactivity it allows. Inspired by Capcom's '90s fantasy beat-'em-ups, it also encompasses a great many more recent influences, from the monster-climbing of *Shadow of the Colossus* to the weightier realism of *Demon's/Dark Souls*, as well as Capcom's own Monster Hunter and Devil May Cry series (*Dragon's Dogma* director, Hideaki Itsuno, also directed *Devil May Cry 2, 3* and *4*).

In combat, characters may grapple a small opponent to hold it in place, pick up and hurl an explosive barrel at foes, or climb onto large monsters and hack away at weak points. Frequently, they call out tactics to each other, depending on cooperation for success.



Equipment is diverse, and can be upgraded by finding the necessary items; tasks range from mining rare ores to breaking a monster's tusk during battle

Monsters, too, take advantage of interactivity, and a player may find himself dragged into the air by a harpy's claws, bitten and held down by a wolf, or seized and crushed by the hands of a cyclops or ogre.

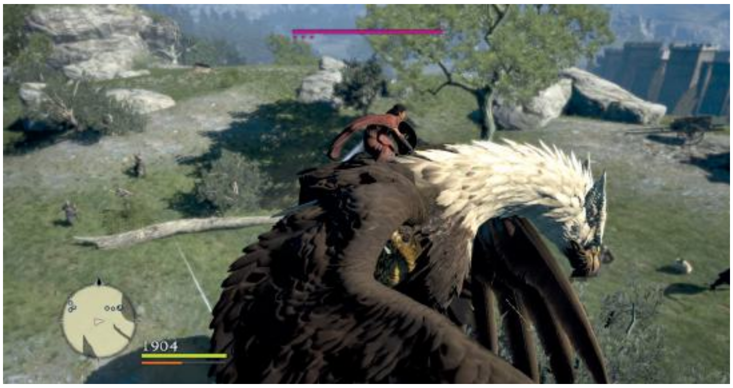
Magic also possesses a rarely-seen physicality. Spells differ not only in elemental effects but also in how they manifest themselves, from a wall of flame, to a pillar of ice (which you can climb over), to a maelstrom sucking up smaller foes and flinging them.

You play as the Arisen – a hero destined to battle the Dragon. In a unique online component, you can be joined by up to three AI-controlled pawns – a main pawn that you create yourself, plus two others recruited from a pool of pawns created by other players (or randomly generated, if you're playing offline).

Pawns are drawn from six vocations (i.e. classes), each with access to a multitude of skills and categories of weapons with only some overlap, causing each vocation to play distinctively from the others. Rangers have a more powerful and further-reaching bow but are less effective at melee than Striders; Sorcerers sacrifice some of the healing and support magic of Mages in exchange for powerful offensive spells; and Warriors hit harder than Fighters but are less defensive. The Arisen also has access to the hybrid vocations: Mystic Knights combine melee ability with magic spells, Assassins can mix the weapons of the Fighter and Strider vocations, and Magick Archers combine dagger-wielding with magical bow abilities.

There are interesting nuances in character creation. Unlike games in which appearance is purely cosmetic, *Dragon's Dogma* offers choices that determine your height and weight class, which has tangible effects, such as making heavier characters more difficult to knock down while smaller characters can fit through small openings.

> "One of our key concepts was to give players around the world the chance to feel like they had genuinely encountered and taken on these mythical beasts that we all have in our collective consciousness. Our art directors and designers tried not to stray too far from the imagery found in ancient legends and iconography."
>
> *– Kento Kinoshita,*
> Dragon's Dogma: Dark Arisen*'s director*



Combat is refreshingly tactile, from climbing larger monsters to grappling with smaller creatures to cutting the heads off hydras

The story is somewhat rudimentary, linking the Arisen to the Dragon from the beginning, and thereafter following a largely linear series of main quests. There are many optional noticeboard quests of the "kill 5 wolves" type, but more interesting are the side-quests initiated by talking with characters, in which decisions can lead to or block further quests, sometimes even eliminating prominent NPCs.

Dragon's Dogma contains an impressive but poorly explained depth; features such as making forgeries of important items (to keep the original for yourself or to sabotage a quest, changing its outcome) and the NPC Affinity system (which controls your relations with every single NPC and determines your romantic interest) have lasting consequences, yet the game barely mentions them.

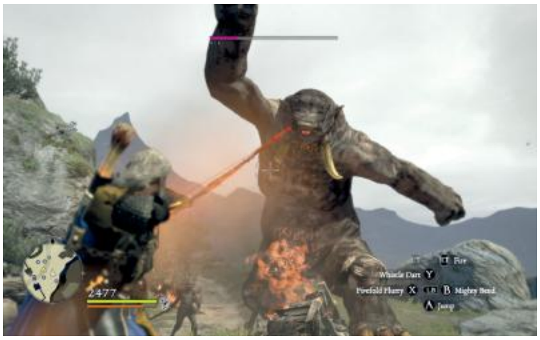
Initially intended to be an open-world game, the scope was drastically reduced during development, leaving *Dragon's Dogma* with the vestiges of open-world design but a setting too small to match. Aside from the city of Gran Soren and the fishing village of Cassardis there are no real settlements to speak of, only a few forts or camps. The game's many quests will take the player across the map multiple times, forcing unwitting players to waste time backtracking and fighting the same respawning mobs of low-level foes.

Thankfully, the *Dragon's Dogma: Dark Arisen* version released a year later expands the existing fast-travel system, greatly reducing the amount of backtracking necessary. Although *Dark Arisen* also makes various minor changes to the base game, its real draw is Bitterblack Isle, a vast dungeon that introduces new treasures and monsters – including deadly necrophages that attack by surprise, attracted by the corpses of slain enemies. Intended for high-level play, the Isle is separate from the main game and can be ventured into as early or late as you desire.

Curiously, *Dragon's Dogma* fails to play to its strengths as much as it could have, with the larger monsters – both climbable and featuring a range of interesting behaviours – appearing only sparingly at first, and a number of creatures emerging only in the final stage of the game. Important systems such as NPC Affinity and Pawn Inclinations (which control Pawn behaviour) are opaque and poorly explained, often resulting in frustrating outcomes and leading wiser players to seek online sources of information.

Still, *Dragon's Dogma* manages to recapture much of the spirit of group adventuring. Those willing to give it a try will not only encounter many legendary creatures but also that rarest of beasts – an RPG with action-based combat done right. **ZD**

In 2015, Capcom released *Dragon's Dogma Online*, a free-to-play MMO spin-off available only in Japan. The game also got an anime adaptation by studio Sublimation, released on Netflix in 2020.



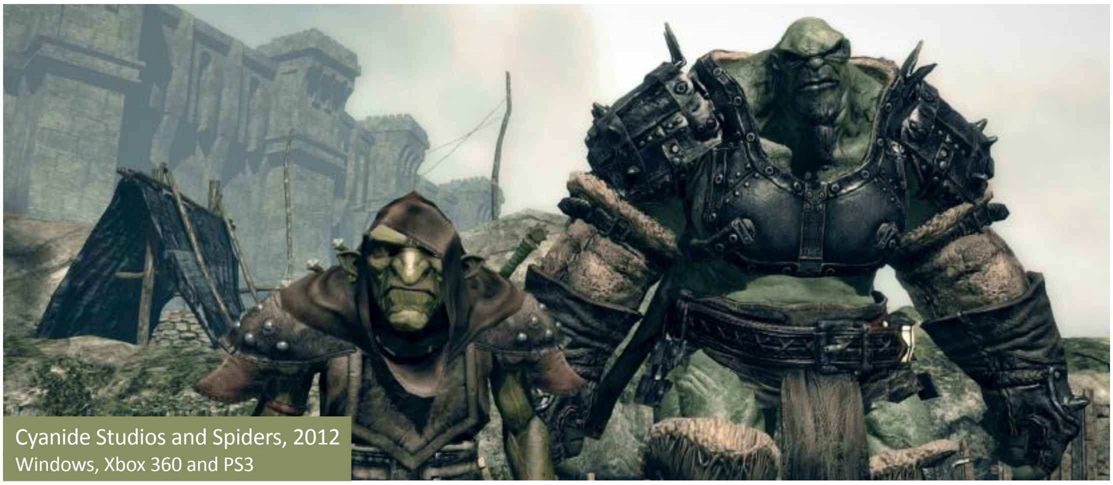
There are five elemental enchantments, plus several status effects such as slow, poisoned, silent, burning, wet, etc.

Mods:

World Difficulty by Lefein: A difficulty mod for those who've already mastered the game, it greatly increases its challenge level, forcing you to use every skill, item and status effect in order to survive. Definitely not recommended for a first playthrough.

The 1.5 version is for the main game mode, the 2.0 version is for New Game+ mode. For the latest updates, check the mod developer's Discord channel.

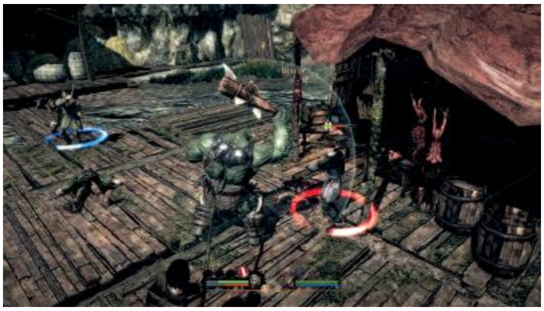
Of Orcs and Men

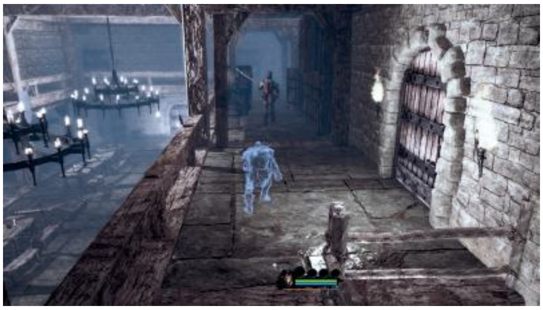

Cyanide Studios and Spiders, 2012
Windows, Xbox 360 and PS3

The unusual choice of having a goblin rogue as protagonist paid off, and in 2014 Styx got his own spin-off game: *Styx: Master of Shadows*, a stealth game.

Purely from a writing standpoint, this game is one of the most overlooked gems of the RPG genre. If you love story-driven RPGs, I highly suggest considering this game. Tons of games talk about "mature themes", but this one really hits the nail on the head – not just with the adult language (which there's a lot of, but it fits the game's themes well).

The story covers racism, slavery, political ambition, violence and betrayal. This is not the clichéd story of a hero setting out to stop a great evil that threatens the world. The war between orcs and humans has been decidedly one-sided and, in a desperate bid to prevent the enslavement of all orcs, an elite orc military unit receives orders for a suicide mission: kill the human emperor.


Combat is real-time, but you can shift into slow motion and queue up to four actions for each of the characters


Styx can sneak around and try to assassinate guards, but he can't go very far from Arkail

In a bold creative choice, *Of Orcs and Men* puts you in control of the "monsters" – Arkail, a brutish orc, and Styx, a stealthy, smart-ass goblin. Both of them are well-written, and it's interesting to see how their interactions with each other change as the story progresses. The plot also contains a few unexpected and well-developed twists, which turns the original plan into something much greater.

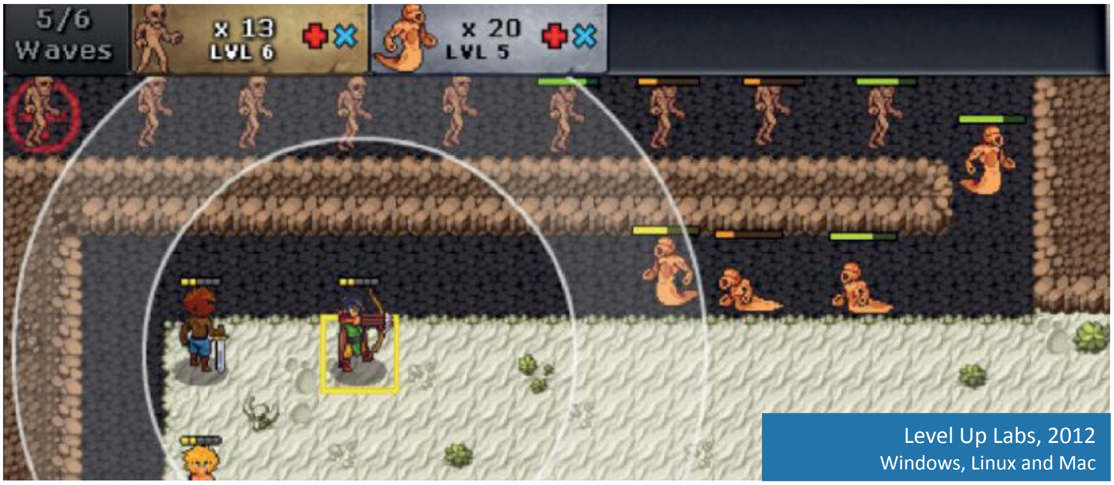
The developers have also done a good job connecting the characters' personalities to their fighting styles. The combat is real-time-with-pause, allowing you to switch back and forth between characters and queue attacks – but before charging into battle you can try sneaking around with Styx and quietly assassinate as many enemies as possible.

The orc, Arkail, is a great embodiment of the berserker-type warrior, and not just in the writing. He sports a rage meter that fills when he takes damage. Once full, he goes into a literally uncontrollable rage. It can turn the tide of a battle in your favour due to the damage boost, but can also cost you heavily thanks to the lack of defence and its potential to accidentally kill Styx. Some combo attacks are also available, such as having Arkail throw the goblin into enemies.

Unfortunately, the game is extremely linear, with almost no exploration or player agency. The maps are repetitive, mostly long corridors full of combat, with minimal detours to occasionally find some loot. There are a handful of side-quests, but they usually just offer more of the same. And there's pretty much no choice and consequence – the game is going to play out in a certain way no matter your dialogue choices.

Of Orcs and Men is definitely not for everyone, but if you enjoy story-driven RPGs there's a very good chance you'll find yourself sucked in, wanting more of the amazing characters and world. **RR**

Defender's Quest: Valley of the Forgotten


5/6 Waves
x 13 LVL 6
x 20 LVL 5

Level Up Labs, 2012
Windows, Linux and Mac

Defender's Quest is simply a great game. This is definitely not the type of game I would normally play. In fact, I have never played a tower defence game before or since. What really appealed to me about it were the RPG elements, and it didn't fail to deliver. The story combines with the combat and character development to make a surprisingly inspired game.

There is an actual story to this game that drives everything forward. The main character, Azra, is infected by a plague and thrown into a pit from which she must escape. As the story unfolds, you'll discover the driving force behind the plague and seek to put an end to it. I really enjoyed the writing, and, while the humour was a bit offbeat, there were several occasions when I literally laughed out loud. There's the clichéd, somewhat dumb warrior (who has some priceless lines), a sarcastic archer, a noble knight and a greedy, egotistical dragon. It's a great mixture that allows for all kinds of comedic interactions.

The game is fairly straightforward: you have to protect your main character and defeat all the waves of attacking enemy forces. This is achieved through carefully positioning your characters at choke points on the map. Adding some tactical depth to the gameplay are the class system and magic spells. There are six different classes, which all have unique skills with varying areas of effect, so careful positioning is the key to victory. As characters level up, you spend points in their skill trees to unlock new abilities or improve existing ones. Azra is immobile during battles, but can spend mana to summon allies, upgrade them or, through various spells, assist in eliminating the hostile hordes. Coming up with strategies to leverage your army's abilities towards victory – preferably flawless – is the real beauty of the combat system.

All the maps have four levels of difficulty to choose from (with the harder tiers obviously netting better rewards), and there's an NG+ mode that adds a new type of currency for the best items. The game is also surprisingly long, clocking in at around 20 hours.

Believe me, even if this isn't something you'd normally play, it is very capable of engulfing you with its charm. I loved it so much I didn't even hesitate to pre-order *Defender's Quest II*. **RR**

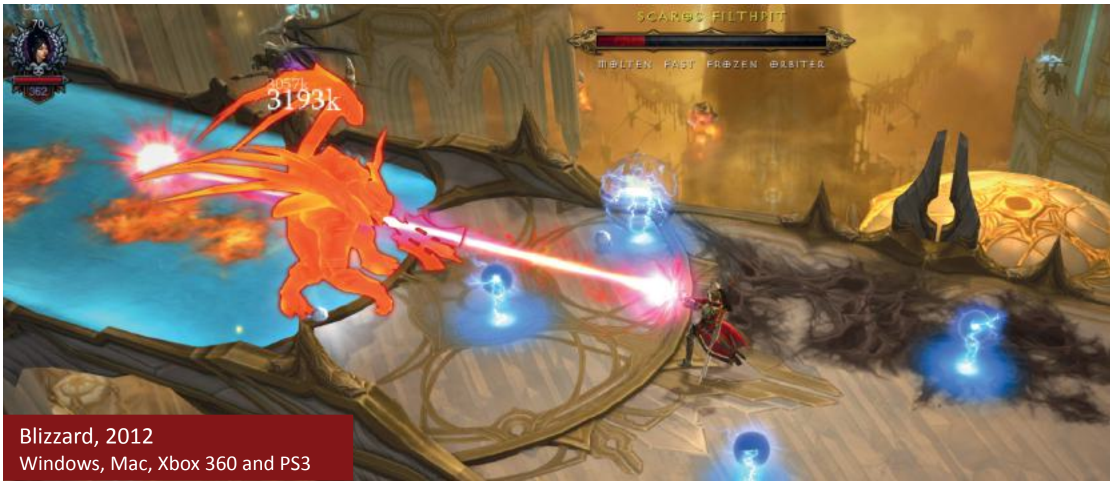
17/18 Waves
HP 330
Psi 148
Kvote (Berserker)
Level 21
HP 616
BOOST: Need 300 Psi
1 2 3 4 5
STATS
TRAITS
1 Slash (1)
2 Double Hit (3)
3 Flurry (5)
4 Swipe (4)
Game Speed
Options Menu

While the initial challenges are easy to complete, some later stages may require you to come back stronger

Victoria
Level 20 Ranger
HP: 336
XP: 7834/8000
Reset pts
Rename
Attack: 21+28
Range: 4.3
Speed: 14.8
Defend: 0+25
Evade: 6%
Regen: 0.4
Bows
Skills
Equip
Unequip
Name
Attack
Owner
Berserkers
Ice mages
Rangers
Knights
Healers
Dragons
Librarian
Show equipped
Go to Map

Besides the skill trees, there's also a large number of items for you to equip your characters, including unique weapons and armour

Diablo III



Blizzard, 2012
Windows, Mac, Xbox 360 and PS3

Among the initial complaints about *Diablo III*, some players thought it was too cartoony and colourful. Blizzard replied by making a secret level full of ponies and colourful art. Players then created a mod called *DarkD3* to make the game darker.

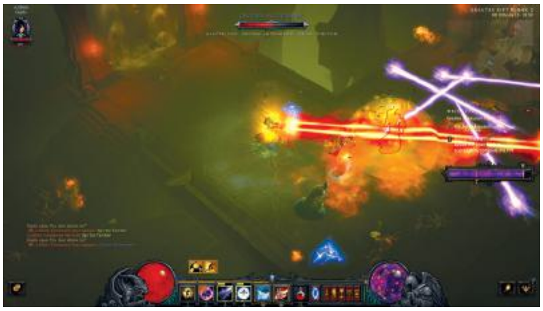
The history of *Diablo III* is one of immense highs and lows. After the outstanding success of *Diablo II* in 2001, Blizzard soon began working on a sequel. Little is known about this project, but reportedly it had fully 3D graphics and several MMO elements, with a large open world.

However, disputes between Blizzard North and Vivendi Games led to several key developers leaving the company and, ultimately, to Blizzard North being closed in 2005. Their version of *Diablo III* was scrapped, and development began on a new one.

In May 2012, 11 years after its predecessor, *Diablo III* was finally released. Expectations were impossibly high, and the game broke PC sales records, selling over three million units in the first 24 hours.

Superficially, the game's core gameplay is very familiar. You have five classes – Wizard, Barbarian, Demon Hunter, Witch Doctor and Monk – who must battle the forces of evil across four story acts.

Highly polished, the game brought in fully 3D graphics and a physics engine that makes each blow feel extremely satisfying. Blizzard opted for a more stylised art style and a greater focus on story, added elements such as events across the maps and crafting, then streamlined some aspects of the game, such as removing the need to stockpile potions and scrolls.



Diablo III places a premium on mobility, as Elite enemies fill their surroundings with poison, lasers, lava and other hazards, then try to push, pull or lock you in place

The biggest change came in the character system. While *Diablo II* was about picking stats and skills as you level up, *Diablo III* focuses on flexibility, offering a range of skills that can be freely changed at any time.

Each character has six slots for active skills and three slots for passive ones (four with the expansion). If at any time you're unhappy with your character build, you can easily change it. Each active skill can also be equipped with a Rune, slightly modifying the skill – reducing cool-downs, changing damage types, adding more effects, making it last longer and so on.

A more controversial decision was that *Diablo III* required an Internet connection, even for single-player, which led to some huge server issues on launch.

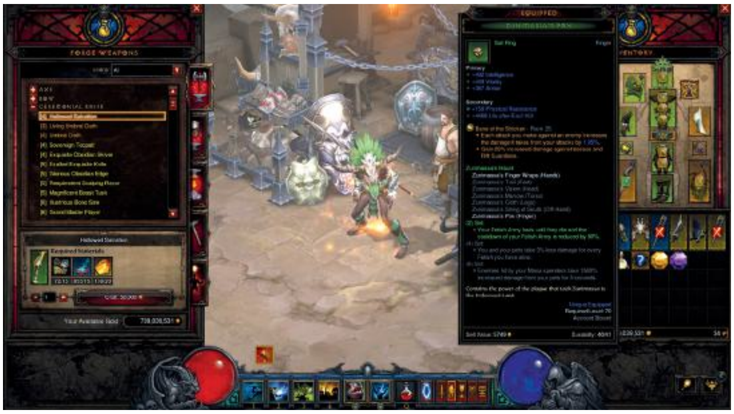
Another disappointment was the game's difficulty, divided into four modes you had to unlock one at a time. Many players (myself included) got burned out by playing 15–20 hours of an incredibly easy game before being allowed to try a harder difficulty. And there was no endgame beyond a pointless grind.

Yet, what nearly killed *Diablo III* was a single, greedy idea: adding an in-game Auction House.

It was made for players to sell their loot, not only for in-game currency, but also for real money – of which Blizzard would take a cut. To be sure people would use it: rare items were dropped sparsely. You could play for hours without seeing a single good drop. And when you got one, chances were that it was for another class, pushing you to sell it at the Auction House and get something you could actually use.

Furthermore, the damage level of every skill and ability was tied to your weapon and gear, making even the best player useless without decent equipment. Progression became inherently tied to the Auction House, the best items selling for over 50 dollars. *Diablo*'s "kill and loot" gameplay loop was broken.

> "What happened is that players started playing the Auction House and not the game, because of how stingy we were when we launched *Diablo III.* [...] In the process they were wrecking their reward loop, they were robbing themselves of the magic of *Diablo*, of killing a monster and seeing the legendary drop and picking it up."
>
> *– Josh Mosqueira,*
> Diablo III*'s game director*



Diablo III packs dozens of skills, plus legendary items, sets and gems with unique powers; with more items being added each Season, players have many possibilities

It took two years for Blizzard to acknowledge the obvious – the Auction House had to go.

In March 2014, they released the *Reaper of Souls* expansion, removing the Auction House and adding a revamped "Loot 2.0" system, dramatically increasing item drop rates and making them more relevant for whichever class you're currently playing.

If *Diablo III* was a good game ruined by poor decisions, *Reaper of Souls* is a cohesive pack of great ideas. Together with a fifth story act and a new class – the Crusader – the expansion added an Adventure mode, in which you freely travel across all areas of the game collecting bounties – brief missions like "complete event X", "clear area Y" or "kill boss Z".

Completing bounties yields rare items and crafting ingredients; it's a good way to level up or gather items without having to replay the campaign.

Other key additions include legendary gems with unique powers, a more robust crafting system, enchanting, and fully reworked difficulty settings, offering players much more freedom in how to play.

Moreover, a solid endgame was finally added, with the Rifts – special dungeons in which you must kill a certain number of enemies to battle a tough boss. On Greater Rifts you have a very strict time limit, and the difficulty levels are virtually endless.

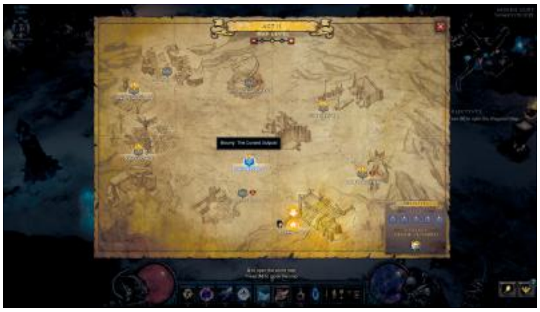
With the expansion came the Seasons, which, every few months, reset the leaderboards and add new content that only freshly-made characters can experience (initially), persuading people to restart the game from Level 1. This worked particularly well with the more flexible skill system, as the steady addition of gems, legendary items and armour sets with special powers provides new playstyles to try every few months. New Seasons are still being released as of 2022.

Also worth mentioning are the Set Dungeons, hidden areas where players who gathered complete equipment sets can test their skills with the powers granted by the Set in custom challenges.

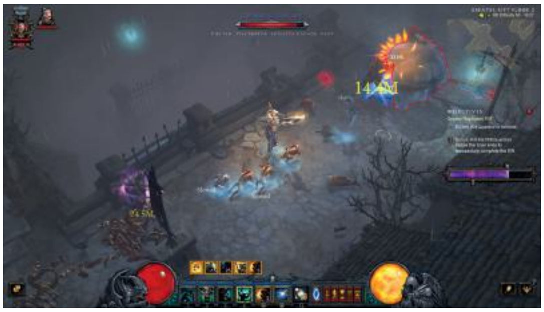
Blizzard also added an abundance of cosmetic rewards, such as portrait frames, pets, banners, wings and unique appearances you can apply to your equipment. Most of these are won by earning special in-game achievements – *Diablo III*'s only DLC came in 2017, adding the Necromancer class for $15.

While the Auction House heavily damaged the game at launch, *Reaper of Souls* later managed to turn *Diablo III* into a friendly, addictive and highly polished package. It may lack the more hardcore experience found in *Grim Dawn* and *Path of Exile* but, for most mainstream players, *Diablo III* is all they need until *Diablo IV*. **FE**

***Diablo III*'s always-online DRM led to several issues, as players were unable to connect to the servers and play the game for weeks after launch. The outrage reignited when Blizzard made the console ports able to play offline, but refused to do so with PCs.**

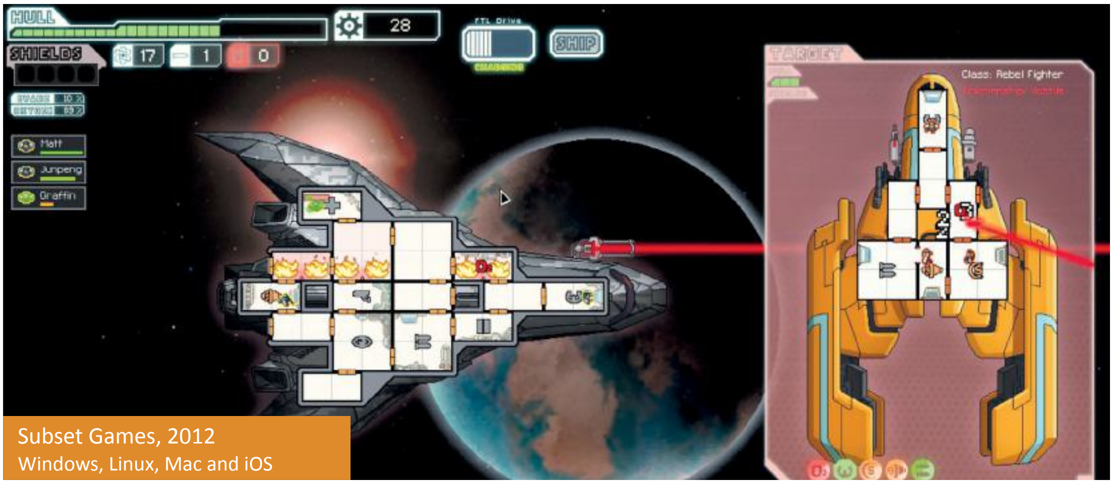


Reaper of Souls added the Adventure mode, in which you can freely travel the world completing bounties



Rifts present an interesting endgame, as you must finish increasingly difficult dungeons under a strict time limit

FTL: Faster Than Light



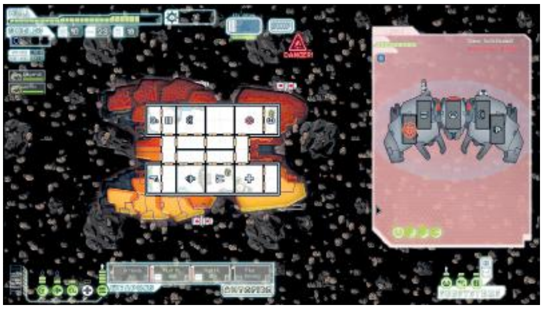
Subset Games, 2012
Windows, Linux, Mac and iOS

Frustrating", "thrilling", "unique". These are just a smattering of the words used to describe the brutally difficult, insanely addictive Roguelike RPG that is *FTL: Faster Than Light*.

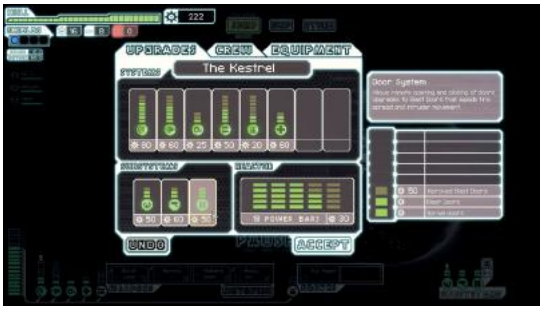
FTL tells the story of a crew of Federation soldiers fleeing the advancing hordes of a rebel force across eight sectors of a galaxy, representing the eight stages of the game, each more dangerous than the last.

Dogged at every turn by the insurrectionists, you face an implacable enemy slowly moving from left to right across each starmap, pushing your ship inexorably toward the next sector, or doom, if you decide to turn and fight. Your crew will encounter pirates, automated drones, distress beacons, ion stars, ship fires, enemy boarding parties and giant alien spiders, to name just a few things that want to kill you.

FTL was funded by a Kickstarter campaign in April 2012. Subset Games received 200,542 dollars, from an initial $10,000 goal.



Some battles can have special hazards, such as fighting against an unmanned drone ship while inside an asteroid field



Not only do you have to choose what systems to upgrade, but also how to distribute your ship's energy between them

What most wants to kill you, it seems at times, is the game itself. *FTL*, like many Roguelikes, has a simple random number generator which determines the outcome of every jump between the stars, every shot fired from your Burst Laser II, every time you send a crew member into harm's way. While certain crew skills and upgrades to your ship increase the percentage chance that the randomly-generated number will come up on your side, there's always the possibility of an extraordinary string of bad luck that ends an otherwise successful run prematurely.

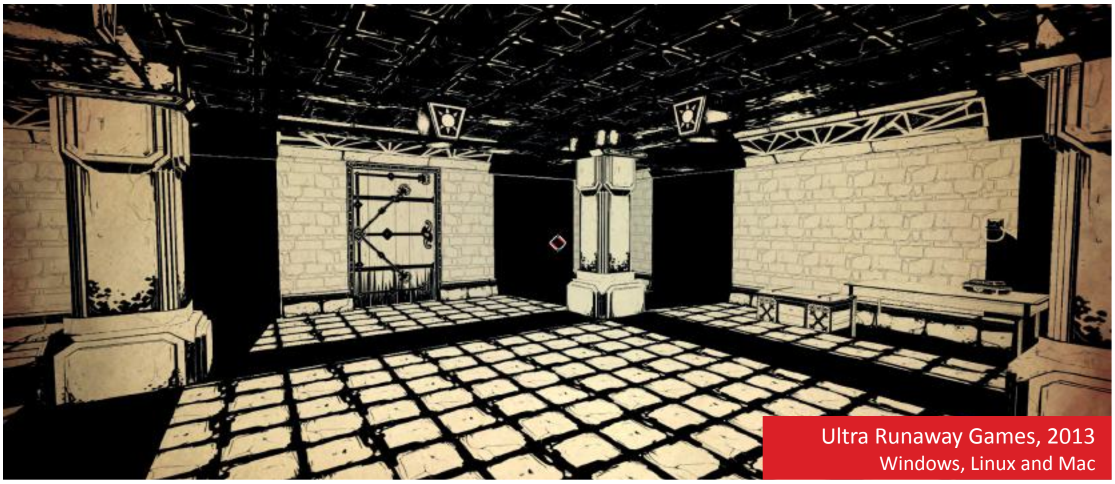
Another Roguelike element is permadeath. When your ship is destroyed, your run ends and you must start again in Sector 1. This adds real weight to every decision you make, and how it will affect your ship and crew.

RPG elements abound in *FTL*: in order to overcome the Rebel flagship at the end of Sector 8, a prudent commander must upgrade their ship's systems; find, purchase, or salvage new weaponry; and recruit and train crew members. These elements contribute directly to a successful run, and it is almost impossible to win without them.

Finally, many mods await the experienced commander. The *Captain's Edition* mod installs a host of new features, including new weapons, random events, space station battles and sector hazards, to name just a few. *Turning the Tide,* another mod, allows a courageous (or perhaps foolhardy) *FTL* captain to turn and face the demons in pursuit, and not only escape, but push the rebels back. All of these mods and more are compatible with *Advanced Edition*, a completely free DLC which adds a new ship and race, new weapons and subsystems, and a few game tweaks.

Don't be daunted by *FTL*'s difficulty – dying is half the fun. No, really, it is! **JU**

Paper Sorcerer



Ultra Runaway Games, 2013
Windows, Linux and Mac

Paper Sorcerer is a throwback to the glorious '80s, paying homage to great blobbers of old and to the point-and-click adventures of the MacVenture series, such as *Shadowgate*.

The most evil of sorcerers has been up to the usual naughty shenanigans, terrorising innocents and wreaking havoc, so a group of heroes has been forced to imprison this danger to society inside a magical book. You play as that evil sorcerer (or sorceress) who must now find a way to break free and exact revenge – an obvious connection to *Wizardry IV*.

The monochrome visual style is original and beautifully minimalist, with the sleek ink design reflecting the central theme of a world within a book.

The core gameplay of *Paper Sorcerer* consists of 3D first-person exploration and puzzle-solving with 2D turn-based combat. The game's dungeon is made of different levels within the magical book prison, each having three floors followed by a boss area. You'll encounter enemies as floating black clouds, and combat begins once you approach them.

As in *Wizardry IV*, you can summon minions to help you, creating a party of up to four characters. You may choose from creatures such as skeletons, witches, ghosts, vampires, cultists, werewolves, trolls and other nasty monsters, each one possessing a wide variety of skills and magic, giving you plenty of party compositions and battle strategies to play with.

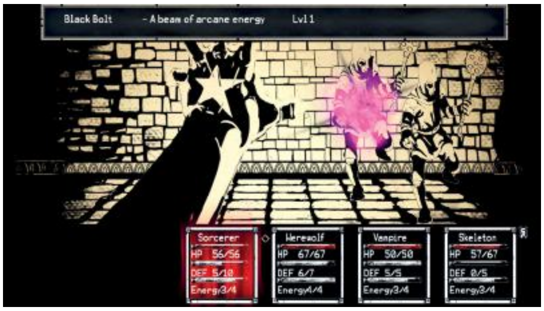
Battles can be very tense, as you'll have to plan for the long run. All characters have Defence points, which block physical damage but decrease with each blow. Health can only be recovered by casting spells, resting or using potions, but you always begin battle with full Defence points. This leads into an interesting dynamic, whereby you'll have to weigh up which stat to invest in and what sort of restoration spells to use.

Beyond the main dungeon, there's a safe zone called the Sanctuary, with a room to rest in, a trainer in skills, a creepy house leading into an optional dungeon and a store to buy equipment and potions.

Paper Sorcerer comes with four difficulty settings available: Easy, Normal, Hard, and the super brutal "1980s mode". The downside is that the random loot drops can be rather unfair, especially on higher difficulties, punishing players and promoting save-scumming (loot is generated when you open a chest).

All in all, *Paper Sorcerer* is a lovely, well-crafted game with superb artistic presentation. While some bugs are present, it's nonetheless a very admirable effort from Jesse Gallagher who, by himself on Unity, created this parchment world for us to discover. **CV**

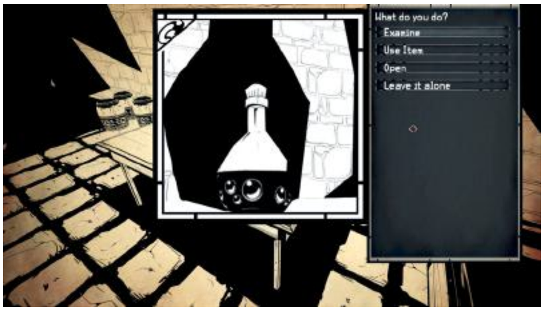
Paper Sorcerer was made by a single developer, Jesse Gallagher, funded by a Kickstarter campaign in June 2012. Jesse received $13,151 dollars, from an initial $5,000 goal.



Black Bolt - A beam of arcane energy Lvl 1

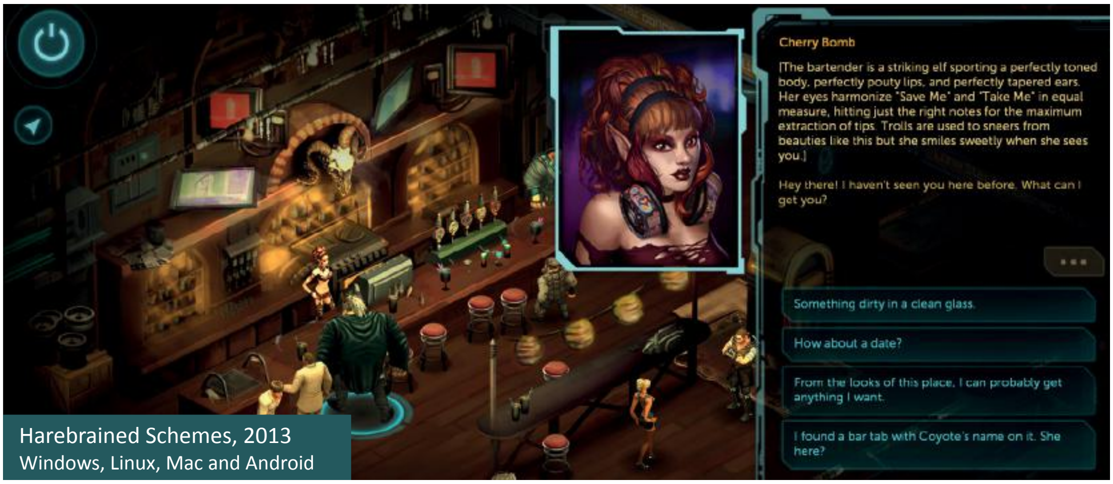
Sorcerer	Werewolf	Vampire	Skeleton
HP 56/56	HP 67/67	HP 50/50	HP 57/67
DEF 5/10	DEF 6/7	DEF 5/5	DEF 0/5
Energy3/4	Energy4/4	Energy3/4	Energy3/4

Characters have an energy pool, necessary for casting most skills; it slowly regenerates each turn, so resource management is key in battle



The dungeons hold many secrets and interactive objects, often cleverly hidden by the game's unique art style

Shadowrun Returns


Cherry Bomb

[The bartender is a striking elf sporting a perfectly toned body, perfectly pouty lips, and perfectly tapered ears. Her eyes harmonize "Save Me" and "Take Me" in equal measure, hitting just the right notes for the maximum extraction of tips. Trolls are used to sneers from beauties like this but she smiles sweetly when she sees you.]

Hey there! I haven't seen you here before. What can I get you?

Something dirty in a clean glass.

How about a date?

From the looks of this place, I can probably get anything I want.

I found a bar tab with Coyote's name on it. She here?

Harebrained Schemes, 2013
Windows, Linux, Mac and Android

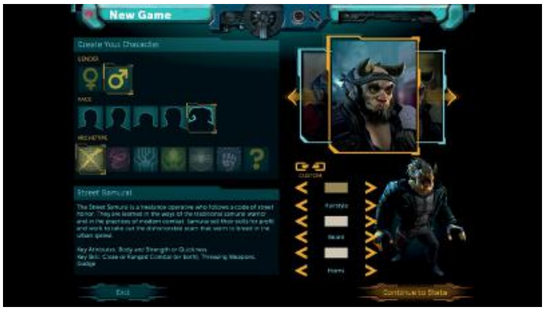
After the *Shadowrun Returns* and *Hong Kong* campaigns, Harebrained Kickstarted *BattleTech,* another setting created by Jordan Weisman. They raised $2.7 million in 2015, and released the game in 2018.

In 1989, *Shadowrun* entered the tabletop RPG market, one year after *Cyberpunk* (not yet *2020*). *Shadowrun* brought with it a different angle on the genre: in addition to the grimy futuristic hellscape of tech and corporate rule, it also wove in the return of magic to "our" world, placing orcs, mages and dragons alongside cyberdecks and street samurai.

Two videogames hit home consoles in 1993 and 1994, for the SNES and SEGA Genesis respectively. The two were vastly different; the latter was an open-world action RPG with Roguelike elements. The SNES game was a more linear, plot-oriented action RPG.

After this, the videogame licence languished in North America until 2007, when Microsoft released a lacklustre first/third-person deathmatch game for Windows Vista and the Xbox 360, which has thankfully mostly fallen from memory. At the time, it seemed like the death knell for this part of the franchise for fans of the earlier console games.

Enter Kickstarter. In 2012, Harebrained Schemes put up a campaign proposing *Shadowrun Returns*, a single-player isometric turn-based RPG for PCs and tablets, designed by the original creator of *Shadowrun*, Jordan Weisman. They asked for $400,000. What they got was over $1.8 million.



There are five races (human, elf, dwarf, orc and troll) and six archetypes to pick from, but you can also create your own, mixing the game's various skills and stats

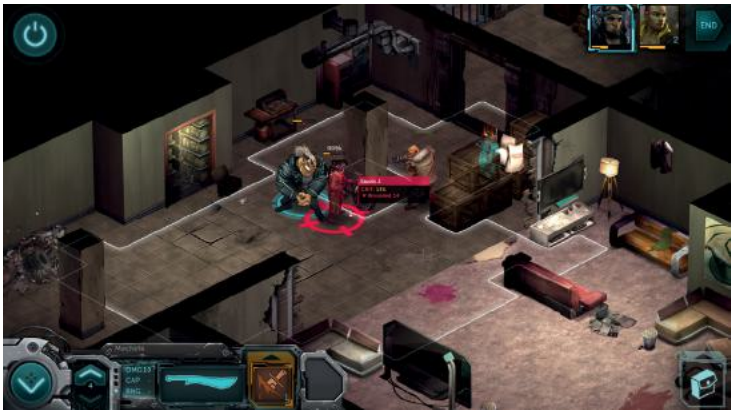
The game dropped in July 2013 with the promised campaign, called *Dead Man's Switch*. It was … fine. Not perfect; the licensing agreement with Microsoft caused a to-do about the DRM (later resolved), and the game had no ability to save manually. This wasn't terrible, but the campaign was heavily combat-oriented, with long levels, and the turn-based battle system was heavily reminiscent of the new *XCOM*'s, with RNG lurking around every turn.

The campaign escalated the stakes awkwardly, featuring a cult that was secretly a front for bug spirits that threatened to destroy Seattle. When the storytelling was personal, it was decent, but it strayed too often into combat and cameos from godlike NPCs from the tabletop game. Promised ties to the console games proved to mostly be the return of the main character from the SNES game as an NPC, and otherwise the cast was lacklustre. But the game played OK up until the final level, in which you were forced to use inaccurate, low-damage weapons in order to defeat the otherwise endlessly respawning bug spirits.

If that had been everything *Shadowrun Returns* had to offer, it would have been a decent, but not exceptional game for long-time fans. However, as a stretch goal in the Kickstarter campaign, they promised an entire second campaign, set in a city of the backers' choice. Polling settled on the Flux State of Berlin.

Dragonfall hit as an expansion in 2014, and blew expectations set by *Dead Man's Switch* out of the water. The PC was still a player-generated blank slate, but you were given more leeway in dialogue options to define your character. Also, you were given a team, rather than a rotating mass of hired shadowrunners that filled out your party during fights. The flow of the game changed from being wholly linear to hub-based, with a slate of missions you could choose from.

> “*Shadowrun* mixed the cyberpunk meta-theme of the dehumanisation of humanity and the destruction of nature with the optimism of nature reasserting itself via the return of magic and all the flora and fauna that come with it. Whereas cyberpunk can become a monochrome of grey, *Shadowrun* became a universe of vivid contrasts, with everything from mage wage-slaves to troll biker gangs.”
>
> *– Jordan Weisman,*
> Shadowrun*’s creator*



Combat is turn-based and plays similarly to the new *XCOM*’s; characters have only 2–3 action points and can use cover, but also have access to spells, summons and drones

The story was complex, using sharply written dialogue trees with decisions that deftly avoided clear “best” options. This made for a dark mood – maybe a little too dark in the end; there were multiple endings, but they all led to the canon ending laid out by the *Shadowrun* metaplot, which left the impression that there was no real way to win in the end.

Still, *Shadowrun* is a setting that prizes getting personal victories where you can, while you watch the world go to hell around you.

Dragonfall was so much better than the original campaign that the developers re-released it later that year as an expanded stand-alone title, named *Dragonfall: Director’s Cut*.

The good bits became better; you got the chance to delve deeper into your team’s stories, they gave you better customisation, and expanded the already great soundtrack. The bad bits improved: the combat system was overhauled, making it more tactical, and the UI was redone. You also finally had save slots. Overall, *Dragonfall* would have been a fantastic send-off for the series.

Yet, there was still more to come. Berlin had won the original poll, but Hong Kong was an extremely close second, so Harebrained launched another Kickstarter in 2015 – this time raising $1.2 million.

Shadowrun: Hong Kong dropped later that year, featuring even more system refinements and gameplay tweaks. Whether it was better than *Dragonfall* is mostly a matter of taste – *Hong Kong* had a larger, mostly less close-knit cast on your team, and though the stakes were on a similar scale, they felt smaller, closer, part of the family-oriented plot.

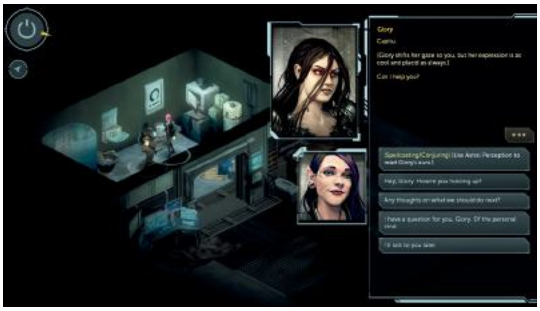
The developers followed it up yet again by adding *Shadows of Hong Kong*, a whole extra campaign set after the first, along with the usual fixes and polish, releasing *Shadowrun: Hong Kong - Extended Edition*.

Harebrained is on record that they’re done with making games on this engine, leaving *Shadowrun: Hong Kong* as the capstone of the series for the time being. With *Dragonfall* and *Hong Kong* in particular, they’ve done what few have been able to do: take classic videogames and not only give respect to players’ nostalgia with new entries, but in many ways surpass the originals. **TAB**

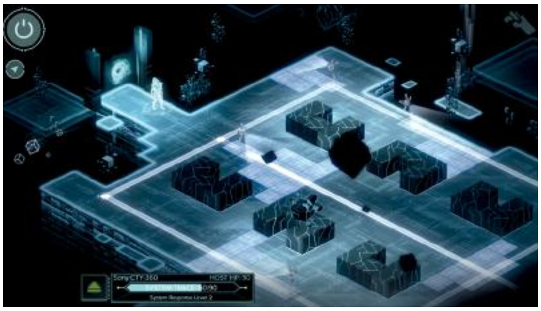
***Shadowrun* was a popular tabletop RPG during the ’90s, with hundreds of source books, its own magazines, two console games, trading cards and over 40 novels. Its latest version was released in 2019, called *Sixth Edition*.**

Editor and Steam Workshop:

Harebrained released an editor for each of their *Shadowrun* games, allowing players to create new adventures and share them via Steam Workshop. We suggest *Antumbra*, *The Price of Conviction* and *From the Shadows*.

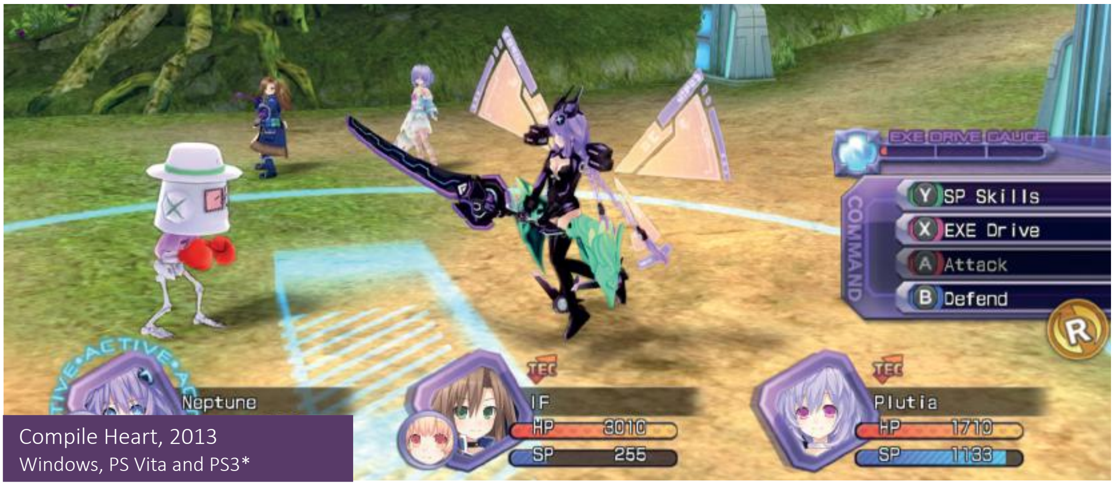


The original game assigns specific NPCs on each mission, but *Dragonfall* offers a BioWare-ish cast of fixed companions



You can hack into terminals, sneaking past security to steal data; originally turn-based, this became real-time in *Hong Kong*

Hyperdimension Neptunia - Re;Birth1

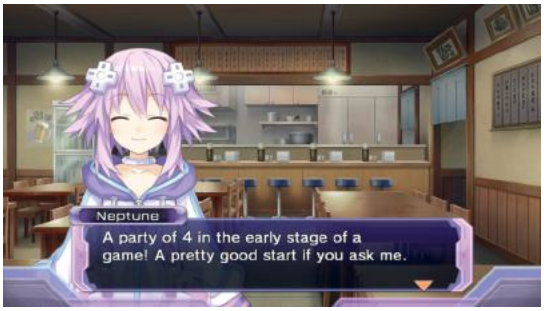


Compile Heart, 2013
Windows, PS Vita and PS3*

***The game was originally released for the PS3 in 2010 as *Hyperdimension Neptunia.* The 2013 *Re;Birth* version for PS Vita and Windows is a complete remake.**

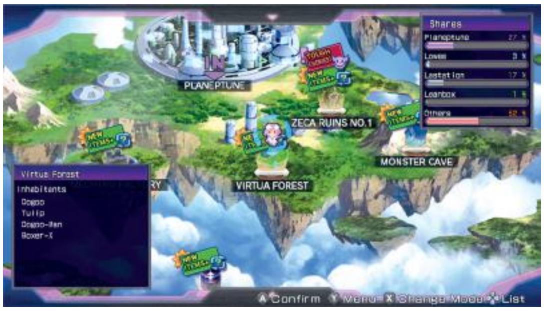
A game that no one expected to see on PCs, *Neptunia* is set in the world of Gamindustri, where four nations – Lowee, Lastation, Leanbox and Planeptune – are locked in an eternal conflict called the Console War. The first three nations clearly represent the Wii, PlayStation and Xbox consoles, while the last one is a reference to the SEGA Neptune, a cancelled console from the '90s.

In one of the most bizarre industry metaphors, the game begins as the "console goddesses" join forces against the Planeptune goddess and remove her from the Console War. And so you must help Neptune, a powerless and amnesiac personification of a cancelled console, to return to her rightful place and save all of Gamindustri. Hard to find a weirder premise.



Neptune
A party of 4 in the early stage of a game! A pretty good start if you ask me.

Dialogues are filled with references, puns and fourth-wall-breaking jokes that were well handled by the translation



A 2D world map gives you access to various dungeons, which can later be "re-programmed" to contain new monsters and items

Neptunia as a whole is a light-hearted tribute to video games, especially to independent Japanese studios that during the 2000s carved a niche with "mid-tier" series like Atelier, Disgaea and Agarest. Your first two companions, Compa and IF, are the personifications of Compile Heart and Idea Factory, the game's developers and its parent company, respectively. You'll meet more characters alluding to Japanese companies and games, as well as countless other references in the form of enemies, dungeons, attacks, items, jokes and game mechanics.

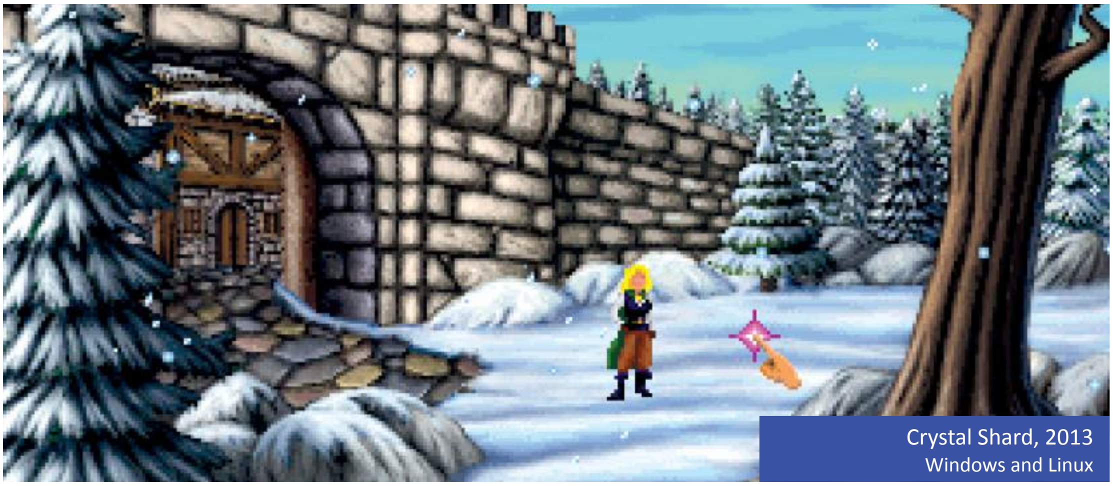
The unusual setting aside, *Neptunia* is a standard yet solid JRPG. The story is told via 2D cutscenes (with their fair share of puns and fan-service), and the simple dungeons are explored with a 3D third-person camera.

Touch an enemy and you enter turn-based combat, in which characters can freely move a certain distance and each weapon/skill has a different range. The game shines with the impressive amount of depth beneath, featuring a robust equipment and crafting system, special goddess forms, diverse enemies, multiple status effects and many companions to use (even more with the DLCs). You can customise their powers, attack types, appearance and battle formation, and pair them with other characters to gain special bonuses and combos.

Battles can be very tough, so you'll have to grind at some points, usually by doing side-quests at the guild and revisiting dungeons in pursuit of XP, items and materials for crafting. An interesting feature here is the ability to "re-program" dungeons, adding new monsters, different item drops or raising the difficulty.

A huge hit, the game quickly got multiple sequels, manga and anime versions and a series of spin-offs, such as card games and an idol-raising sim – a total of 19 games as of 2021! *Neptunia* is an extremely niche game, but one that perfectly resonates with its audience. **FE**

Heroine's Quest: The Herald of Ragnarok



Crystal Shard, 2013
Windows and Linux

Crystal Shard is not new to adventure games. This indie studio has been developing them since 2001, but most of them are made with Adventure Games Studio and, on top of that, they are all free. So I didn't expect much of *Heroine's Quest*.

I was wrong. Imagine a parallel universe where Sierra released *Quest for Glory* in 2013, with the same VGA graphics, but bigger, with more RPG stats, and tuned to Norse mythology. That's *Heroine's Quest*. Yes, it's that good.

Any fan of *QfG* will immediately feel at home. It's all very familiar: the similar graphics, the good old Sierra interface, the three classes – Warrior, Sorceress and Rogue – and the distinctive battles with monsters. But it's a parallel universe, remember? So, apart from some jokes about *Harry Potter*, *The Hobbit* and other modern references, the game is quite original.

Your heroine arrives in a small town during an unusually long winter. As it happens, this winter is unnatural, a sign of the forthcoming Ragnarok – the end of the world at the hands of monsters and frost giants. And, of course, it's up to you to save the world, regardless of your initial below-average physical condition and zero equipment.

The Adventure part is quite solid: most tasks are logical, and very rarely require guessing. Moreover, key tasks are marked on your map, so you'll never lose track. Most quests can be solved in several ways, and each class has its own personal quests and goals. As a result, playing each class feels like a distinctively different game that follows the same plot and setting, so you could easily play it at least thrice.

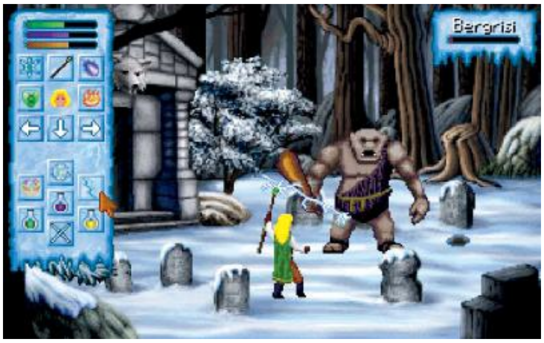
The role-playing aspect is also very well thought out. Your success in certain puzzles is determined by several stats and skills, which improve during your adventures while you use them, quite naturally.

Thus, climbing a tree will raise the Climb skill and also the Strength stat; casting a Fire Shield will raise the corresponding skill and the Magic stat; while battling with random monsters will raise almost everything – if you live to tell the tale.

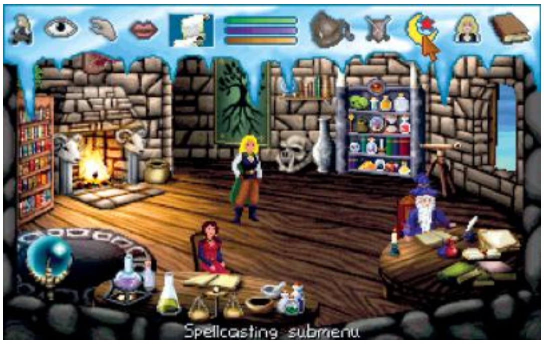
Finally, there's also a day-night cycle and three conditions you must constantly monitor: Cold, Sleep and Hunger. Sadly, while they offer some challenge at first, later they become simply a distraction that prevents you from finishing the game too fast.

Regardless, *Heroine's Quest* is great, and I fully recommend it to any adventure lover – especially to those fond of the *Quest for Glory* games. **SS**

***Heroine's Quest* is free, available for download on Steam or on the developer's website: www.crystalshard.net.**

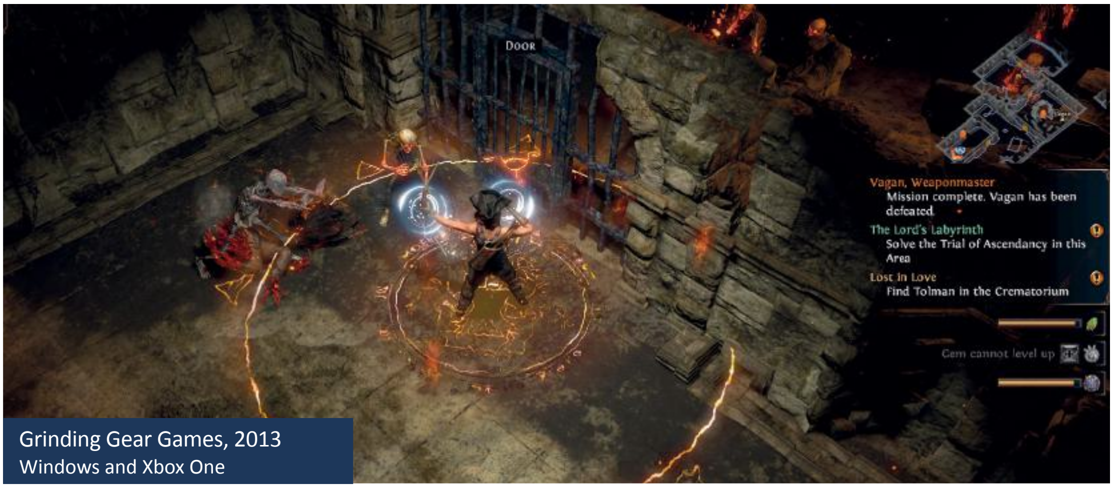


Battles are very similar to those of *Quest for Glory I-III*, but can offer a lot of options depending on your class, skills and items



The game uses an icon-based interface similar to that of classic Sierra games like *King's Quest V* and *Quest for Glory III*

Path of Exile



Vagan, Weaponmaster
Mission complete. Vagan has been defeated

The Lord's Labyrinth
Solve the Trial of Ascendancy in this Area

Lost in Love
Find Tolman in the Crematorium

Gem cannot level up

Grinding Gear Games, 2013
Windows and Xbox One

***Path of Exile*'s business model relies on selling cosmetic items and quality-of-life features such as extra stash room or character slots, as well as supporter packs with physical rewards and perks like designing an item.**

Designed from the ground up as a free-to-play action RPG that "will never be pay-to-win", *Path of Exile* began with 250,000 players during its beta, grew to over 11 million registered players by 2015, and keeps expanding to this day.

One of the things that drives such impressive numbers and keeps the community active is *Path of Exile*'s tireless pursuit of innovation and the developer's attention to player feedback.

Clearly inspired by *Diablo II*, the game captures what many fans felt was missing in Blizzard's third entry in the series: atmosphere and complexity. Expertly mixing old and new design trends, *Path of Exile* brings back that experience of spending hours pondering over abilities, items and stats, trying to create your own perfect build.

The game has seven classes: Marauder, Duellist, Ranger, Shadow, Witch, Templar and Scion. There are only three base stats – Strength, Intelligence and Dexterity – and that's reflected in the class roles. Three classes focus on one stat (e.g. the Ranger relies on Dexterity), three are hybrid classes (e.g. the Templar, with Strength/Intelligence), and the Scion is an all-rounder. However, any character can use any item or skill, as long as they meet the stat requirements.

Some of the game's maps make extensive use of puzzles and traps, which can be as deadly as any boss fight

Action RPGs usually focus on two main features: abilities and loot. In *Path of Exile,* these two are intertwined, as all abilities come from Ability Gems which are socketed into your equipment. Moreover, you can use up to five Support Gems to modify a single ability. You could make a Fireball jump between targets, split into multiple projectiles, freeze enemies, drain HP or auto-cast on critical melee hits – perhaps even all of these at once!

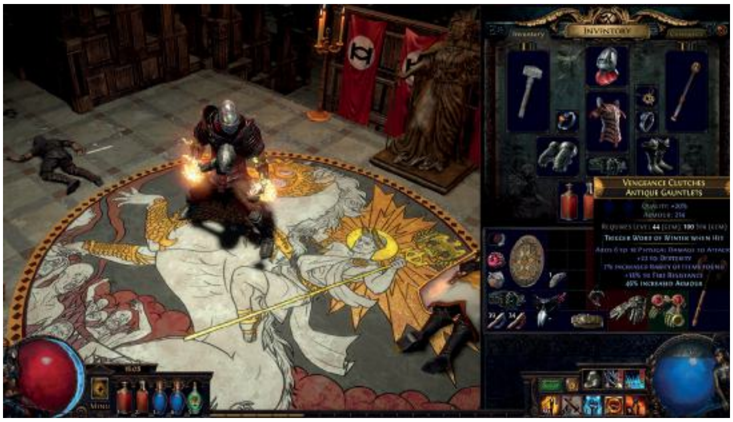
This allows for a great degree of customisation, which is perfectly complemented by the game's defining feature: the Passive Skill Tree.

Path of Exile features a huge, daunting skill tree composed of 1,325 nodes! These provide all sorts of passive benefits, from increasing stats and damage to more radical changes, such as converting all Evasion into Armour, using Health to cast abilities, or having only 1 max HP but being immune to Chaos damage. All classes share this same tree; they just start at different points. As such, players can focus on the nearby nodes, which provide bonuses associated with the character's class, or travel all across the tree, mixing bonuses from several different classes.

It may be overwhelming at first, but, no matter how good or bad your build is, you're always learning and evolving – the next character will be easier to make, and you never feel like you wasted your time.

Which is great, since *Path of Exile* is designed as a replayable, long-term experience. It features an extensive and challenging endgame, which constantly grows bigger. As of late 2021, the game had 25 expansions, adding new features such as challenge leagues, new NPCs, player hideouts, corruption, etc. The downside of this is that the game has a bit of content-creep and can be intimidating at first, but the developers keep a close eye on the community.

> "The problem that we found was that, because of this classless system, you kinda only needed to play one or two characters – you know, the one you like, and maybe a second one. It wouldn't be this cool thing that they had in *Diablo*, where you intend to play every other class. […] People had no need to make a Ranger because they just played a Witch with a bow. That's why we added the Ascendancy classes."
>
> *– Chris Wilson,*
> Path of Exile*'s producer and lead designer*



Path of Exile tries to innovate in every aspect, including loot; even "white" tier items are valuable, as they can be used to craft powerful, unique items

Initially, *Path of Exile* had only one chapter, then it grew to four, which had to be done on all three difficulty settings to reach the endgame. The developers listened to feedback saying it felt repetitive, and overhauled the entire system. They removed the difficulties and instead doubled the number of chapters – reusing the same assets and locations, but adding some visual changes and new, much more difficult battles.

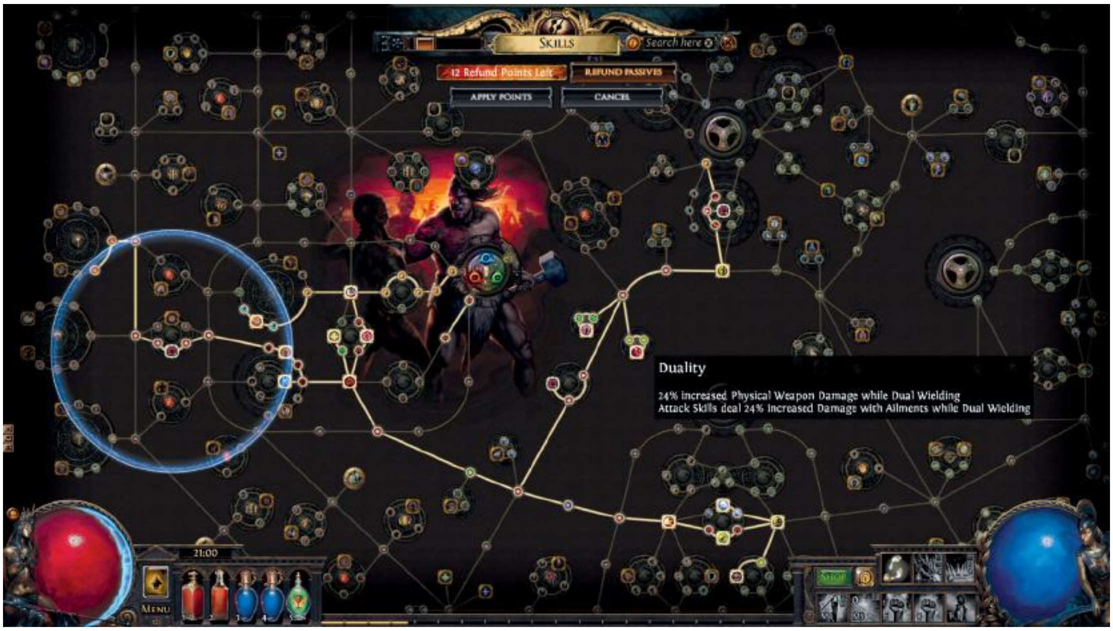
Other recent changes are the Ascendancy classes, endgame specialisations that provide powerful new playstyles but are restricted to specific classes, thus giving players more incentive to try out all classes, despite the game's mostly classless nature. To unlock an Ascendancy class you must beat The Lord's Labyrinth, a Roguelike-ish experience in which you delve into a maze full of traps, treasures and extremely difficult boss battles, and must finish it without dying.

These are joined by other creative mechanics, such as the lack of currency, a rich crafting system, random maps with special modifiers, buff potions that refill as you kill, etc. Everything in *Path of Exile* feels familiar, but offers interesting new twists.

The game is always online, with other players being visible when inside towns, so you can trade, create parties or jump on a PvP match. This makes the game feel alive even when playing alone, but those seeking an even bigger challenge can lock themselves off from all online interaction in Solo Self-Found mode.

In the end, all these mechanics and features serve *Path of Exile*'s main strength: player choice. Even with the best build and items, no character will be able to excel at everything. Every choice brings trade-offs, and the end result is an experience that's unique and memorable for the player. **TF**

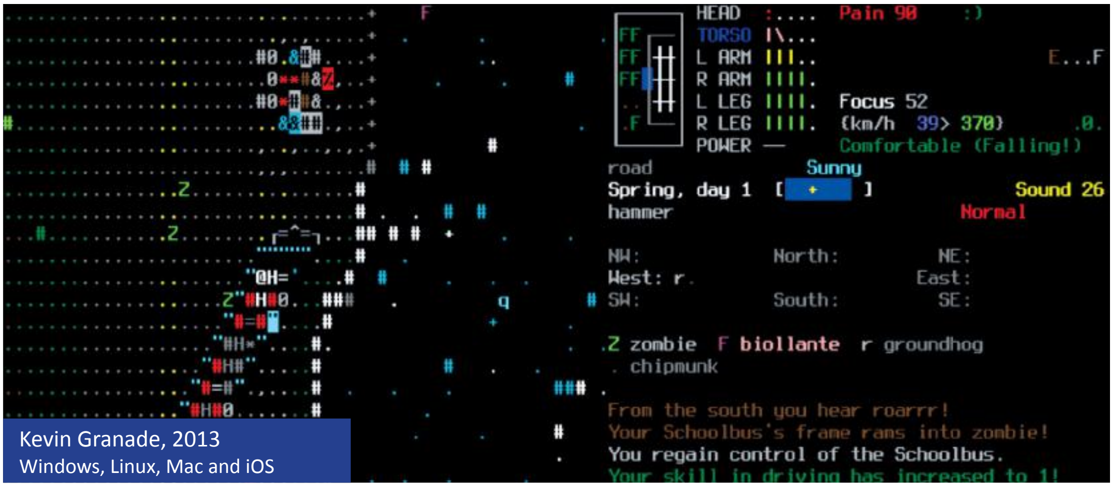
Since the game doesn't have a currency, online trades are based on bartering. The developers deliberately avoid adding an auction house, so players often use services like www.poe.trade to index their trades.



Duality
24% increased Physical Weapon Damage while Dual Wielding
Attack Skills deal 24% increased Damage with Ailments while Dual Wielding

The massive passive skill tree features 1,325 nodes: some offer small stat bonuses, while others will radically change how your character plays

Cataclysm:
Dark Days Ahead



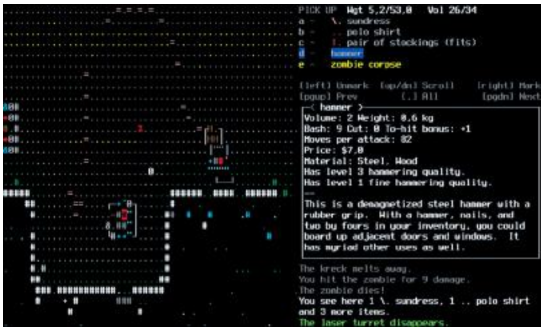
```
HEAD   :....   Pain 90    :)
TORSO  I\...
L ARM  III..                              E...F
R ARM  IIII.
L LEG  IIII.   Focus 52
R LEG  IIII.   (km/h  39> 370)            .0.
POWER  —       Comfortable (Falling!)
road                 Sunny
Spring, day 1  [  +  ]                Sound 26
hammer                            Normal

NW:              North:          NE:
West: r.                       East:
SW:              South:          SE:

.Z zombie  F biollante  r groundhog
 . chipmunk

From the south you hear roarrr!
Your Schoolbus's frame rams into zombie!
You regain control of the Schoolbus.
Your skill in driving has increased to 1!
```

Kevin Granade, 2013
Windows, Linux, Mac and iOS

Cataclysm: Dark Days Ahead could be best described as a lovingly crafted amalgamation of *Fallout*, *Minecraft* and *Deus Ex* with a heaped spoonful of Lovecraftian horror. A free Roguelike, *DDA* is still receiving daily updates and is a long way from finished but, while it needs some polish, that hasn't stopped me from sinking hundreds of hours into zombie- (and other abomination)-infested New England.

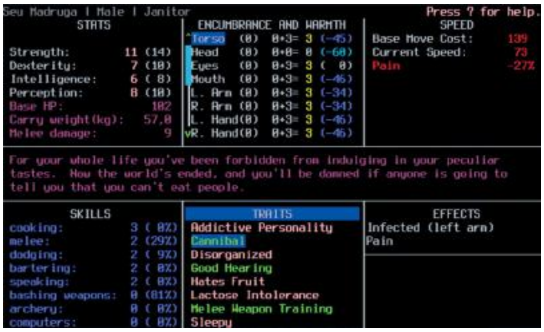
DDA has multiple starting scenarios, but the default one drops you into an emergency shelter with some winter clothing, a knife, a lighter and a bottle of water. From there, you can craft, hunt, scavenge, steal or murder your way from just another (un)lucky survivor to a being of near-godlike power.

Cataclysm: Dark Days Ahead **is based on the original** ***Cataclysm*****, a 2010 Roguelike by Zachary "Whales" Jenkins that was later abandoned.**



```
PICK UP  Wgt 5,2/53,0   Vol 26/34
a -   \. sundress
b -   .. polo shirt
c -   [. pair of stockings (fits)
d -   hammer
e -   zombie corpse

[left] Unmark  [up/dn] Scroll     [right] Mark
[pgup] Prev        [.] All          [pgdn] Next
 -< hammer >
 Volume: 2 Weight: 0.6 kg
 Bash: 9 Cut: 0 To-hit bonus: +1
 Moves per attack: 82
 Price: $7.0
 Material: Steel, Wood
 Has level 3 hammering quality.
 Has level 1 fine hammering quality.
 --
 This is a demagnetized steel hammer with a
 rubber grip.  With a hammer, nails, and
 two by fours in your inventory, you could
 board up adjacent doors and windows.  It
 has myriad other uses as well.
The kreck melts away.
You hit the zombie for 9 damage.
The zombie dies!
You see here 1 \. sundress, 1 .. polo shirt
and 3 more items.
The laser turret disappears.
```

Crafting is a key feature of *DDA*, allowing you to cook, farm, craft weapons, build walls, set traps, board up houses and even repair (or build) vehicles



```
Seu Madruga | Male | Janitor                                         Press ? for help.
            STATS                ENCUMBRANCE AND WARMTH              SPEED
                               ^Torso   (0)  0+3= 3 (-45)  Base Move Cost:     139
 Strength:          11 (14)     Head    (0)  0+0= 0 (-60)  Current Speed:       73
 Dexterity:          7 (10)     Eyes    (0)  0+3= 3 (  0)  Pain               -27%
 Intelligence:       6 ( 8)     Mouth   (0)  0+3= 3 (-46)
 Perception:         8 (10)     L. Arm  (0)  0+3= 3 (-34)
 Base HP:              102      R. Arm  (0)  0+3= 3 (-34)
 Carry weight(kg):    57,0      L. Hand (0)  0+3= 3 (-46)
 Melee damage:           9     vR. Hand (0)  0+3= 3 (-46)

 For your whole life you've been forbidden from indulging in your peculiar
 tastes.  Now the world's ended, and you'll be damned if anyone is going to
 tell you that you can't eat people.

            SKILLS                      TRAITS                      EFFECTS
 cooking:            3 ( 0%)   Addictive Personality        Infected (left arm)
 melee:              2 (29%)   Cannibal                     Pain
 dodging:            2 ( 9%)   Disorganized
 bartering:          2 ( 0%)   Good Hearing
 speaking:           2 ( 0%)   Hates Fruit
 bashing weapons:    0 (81%)   Lactose Intolerance
 archery:            0 ( 0%)   Melee Weapon Training
 computers:          0 ( 0%)   Sleepy
```

The character system is highly complex, with four stats, dozens of skills, positive and negative traits, over 100 professions, locational damage and much more

Just don't expect it to be easy. The learning curve for *DDA* is quite steep and dead bodies litter the conscience of every veteran player, but each one had a reason and each taught a valuable lesson for how to survive. Or just how to not die.

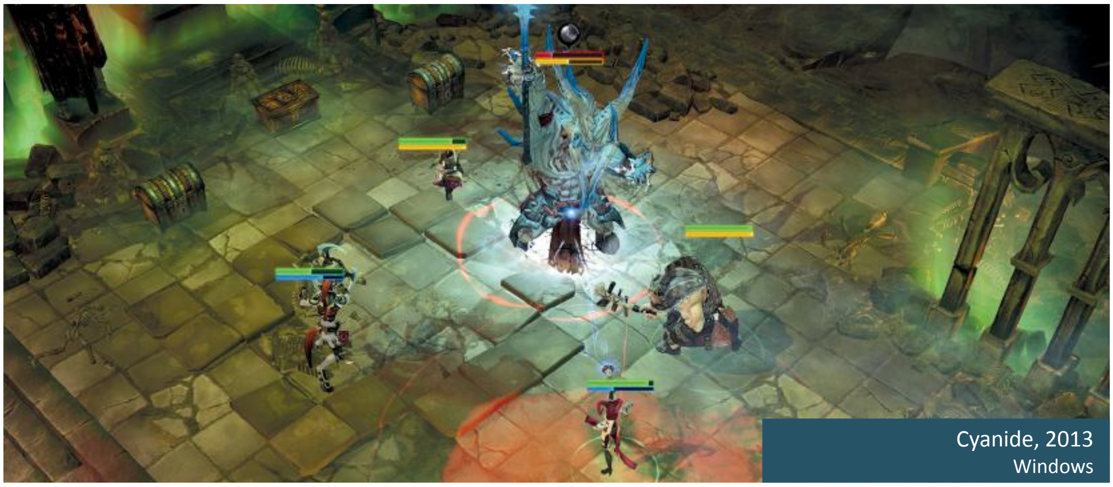
There are dozens of distinct locations to explore, hundreds of items and thousands of things to do. You can spend your time sneaking past a zombie horde to get that last can of beans, spelunking through a science lab for untold treasure or even just cooking yourself a nice meal with the finest apocalyptic ingredients.

Sounds very *Fallout*, doesn't it? But you could also cut down some trees with your trusty chainsaw to build a log cabin, or take some morphine and jam second-hand bionic implants under your skin until you glow in the dark. Grab some mutagen and grow yourself some wings and a tail. With plenty of skill and certain books you could even put together your very own laser cannon. *DDA* is a deep ocean of content for you to explore, and the tap of open-source development is on and making it deeper by the day.

The game also has no set goals. Presumably the player would like to survive and grow in strength until they can slaughter their way through hordes with impunity, but they don't have to. Some choose to simply turn off cities and zombies to play the game as a wilderness simulator, or they pick specific starting scenarios to role-play as a knight, a schoolgirl, a scientist or even a lost BDSM practitioner. Wandering NPCs might give you a quest or stab you in the face, and you can follow quest lines to help fellow survivors.

While most games offer story goals and some tools to apply in order to reach them, *DDA* offers a huge range of tools, and you must supply your own goals. It's a brutal playground and will bring you hours of fun – if you can get over the initial difficulty hump. **D1**

Aarklash: Legacy



Cyanide, 2013
Windows

Inspired by the *Confrontation* desktop miniature game, *Aarklash: Legacy* is a highly tactical real-time-with-pause RPG. It's set in a world engulfed by war, with every race fighting for supremacy on the continent. You control a group of debt collectors called Wheel Swords, who have been wrongly accused of crimes they did not commit and thus need to fight to reveal the conspiracy that threatens their order.

It must be said that *Aarklash* is not very deep in terms of RPG elements. There is no choice and consequence, level design is linear and the story and characters are but a means to an end. Where it really shines is in its smart and complex combat system, which mixes genres in challenging and interesting ways, with a relatively long learning curve.

Your party is composed of four characters from a panel of eight heroes. The standard MMO trinity – Tank, Healer, DPS – applies here, but each role has been tweaked to be interesting, highly customisable and useful in more ways than one.

Wendaroo, for example, one of the two healers available, can heal and do damage, but won't regenerate mana. To keep healing the tank, he must steal life from other party members, potentially leaving them vulnerable. Every character plays with risk and reward, which makes each feel very unique and fun to play, making you think before every click.

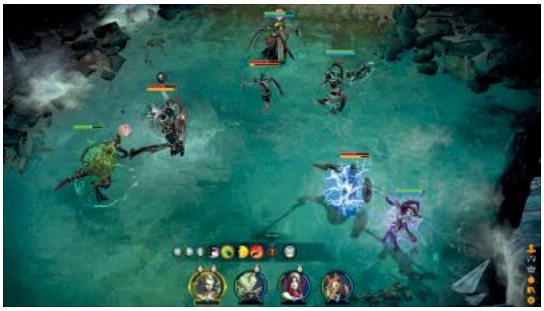
Aarklash is entirely linear, pushing you across several maps with nothing but battles and some story bits. An advantage to this approach is that each encounter is handcrafted, without any trash mobs. Fights work like puzzles, providing new challenges that keep the game fresh. Each enemy has its own active and passive skills, to which the player must learn how to react. Knowing which enemy must be killed first is very important, and positioning is crucial.

You'll have to micromanage all four of your characters, use buffs and debuffs, heal, silence enemies, increase defence, and so on. One wrong decision during battle – whether that be your positioning, focusing on the wrong enemy first or mistimed ability – can and will kill you.

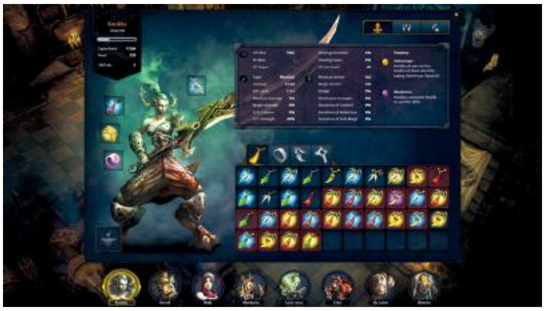
Still, every time I died I managed to understand exactly what I'd done wrong. It is tough, but fair.

Aarklash is not a *Diablo*-like loot-fest – you won't even find new weapons or armour, only accessories. It's not an RPG with significant story or reactivity either, but don't let that turn you off. I didn't expect much going into it, but *Aarklash: Legacy* proved itself a hidden gem for those who want good tactical combat and don't mind the fact it doesn't offer much else. **RI**

***Confrontation* was a popular tabletop wargame released in 1997 by French publisher Rackham. The company closed in 2010, but Cyanide acquired its IP to produce a PC version of the game in 2012 and, later, *Aarklash*.**

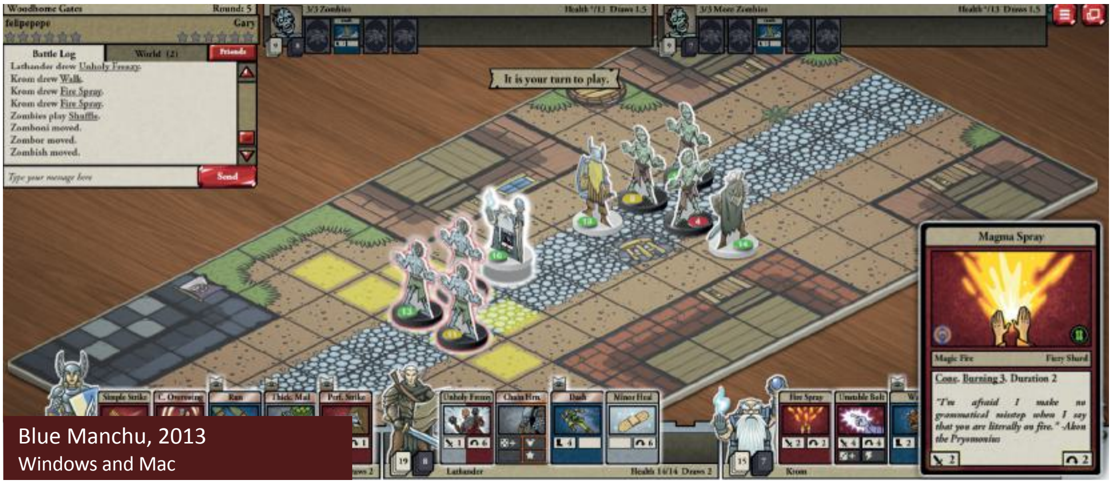


The RtwP combat will be familiar to fans of games like *Baldur's Gate*, but it requires much more micromanaging



Each hero only has four abilities and can't change their equipment, but they can be customised via a skill tree or just swapped anytime for other heroes

Card Hunter



Lathander drew Unholy Frenzy.
Krom drew Walk.
Krom drew Fire Spray.
Krom drew Fire Spray.
Zombies play Shuffle.
Zomboni moved.
Zombor moved.
Zombish moved.

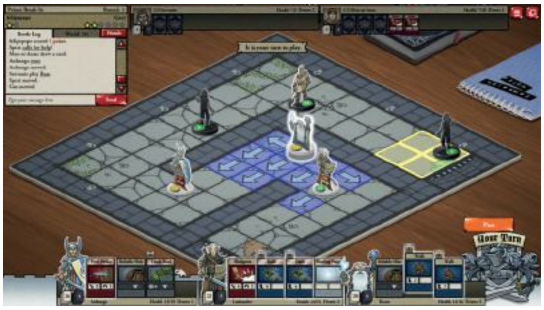
"I'm afraid I make no grammatical misstep when I say that you are literally on fire." -Alon the Pryomonius

Blue Manchu, 2013
Windows and Mac

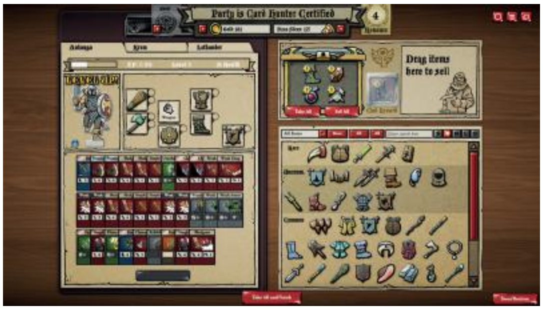
If *AD&D* and *Magic: The Gathering* had a baby, it would be *Card Hunter*. Jonathon Chey, co-founder of Irrational Games, hired Richard Garfield, the creator of *Magic*, to help him develop a tactical role-playing card-based free-to-play game. The end result is unlike anything else out there – quick, funny and deeply tactical, without taking itself too seriously.

Card Hunter was first released in 2013 as a web browser-based Flash game. In 2015, it also got a stand-alone Steam client for Windows & Mac.

A recent trend in game design circles is to eschew RNG (and therefore luck) in favour of other mechanics. *Card Hunter* is a giant stride forwards in this direction. Stats, abilities, skills and perks have all been eliminated by simply making everything a card. Equip a pair of Boots of Buttkicking? Some movement and armour cards are added to the character's deck. Removed a Perplexing Mirror trinket? Its spell cards come out.



Some battles have special objectives, such as controlling victory points, surviving X turns or defeating the enemy's leader



You build your party of three heroes, choosing from three classes, three races and countless spells and equipment

The game still has some dice-rolls, but these are only for some cards and only to enact their special powers. A good example is armour, which is played as a "counter". Some armour always slightly reduces damage, while others reduce more but only on a successful dice-roll of, say, 3+. It's a well-balanced system that feels right even when the dice-rolls are not in your favour.

Thus, equipment upgrades are agonising choices compared to the obvious DPS increases found in so many games. One weapon gives you two great attack cards and one lousy one, while another weapon offers three good attack cards. Which is better? You decide.

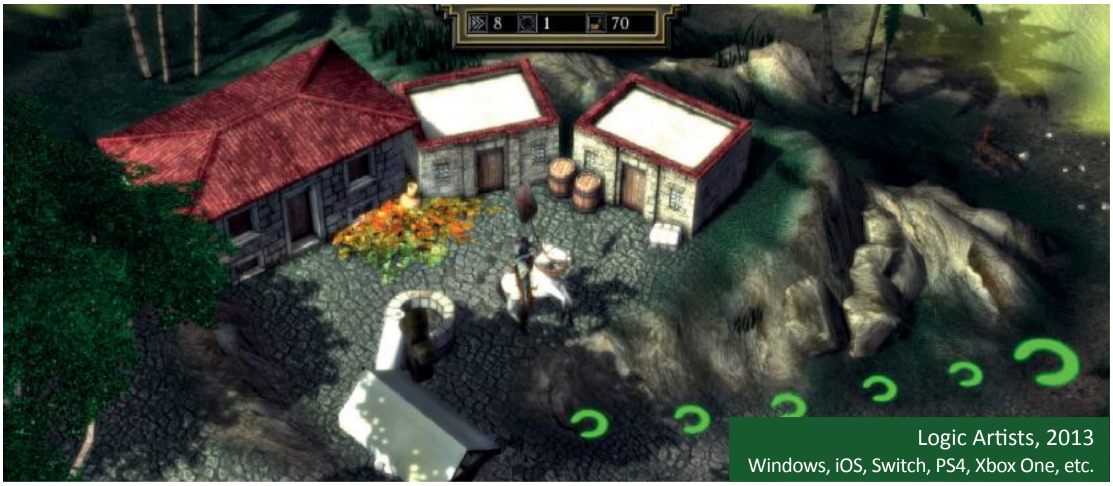
Battles follow an original formula: at the start of the round each character draws up to their hand limit. Then each side takes turns playing cards: attack cards to attack, movement cards to walk or run X squares, and counter cards (like armour) to cancel opponents' cards. When you have no cards left to play, or don't like your remaining cards, you pass. Once both sides pass, a new round begins. Characters keep up to two cards into the next round, with the remainder discarded. There's strategy in when to play and when to pass.

Adventures are played in self-contained modules, much like classic *D&D* modules. The campaign map provides increasingly diverse modules to choose, plus shops to buy cards and taverns to recruit/replace heroes.

A free-to-play game, *Card Hunter* is constantly in development, with new expansions and features (such as co-op) being added at regular intervals. Players can use real money to buy adventures, cosmetic changes, gold, loot chests and club membership – which offers an extra piece of loot in every chest for a period of days.

An anomaly in today's RPG scene, *Card Hunter* is a shining example of what a few seasoned AAA developers can do if they go indie. With a little help, they can turn a genre upside down. **TH**

Expeditions: Conquistador



Logic Artists, 2013
Windows, iOS, Switch, PS4, Xbox One, etc.

In a pleasant change, *Expeditions: Conquistador* is set during an unusual time period for a game: the Spanish colonization of Hispaniola and Mexico. Your player avatar is one of the Conquistadors, who is leading a group into the wilderness. Your goal is to explore, trade, assist your fellow Spaniards and deal with the native peoples.

You start by creating your character, allocating points into diplomacy, hunting, scouting, medicine, tactics and leadership. These values will heavily affect your party's performance during gameplay. Afterwards, you must select an intrepid band of 10 followers from a pool, each with personality traits such as aggressive, cautious, racist and adventurous. These personalities will clash constantly throughout the game. For example, a cautious follower will ask you to avoid direct combat; failing to do so could lead to morale penalties.

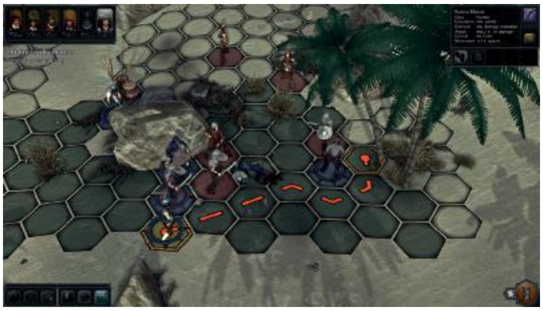
The majority of gameplay takes place on an overhead map reminiscent of *Heroes of Might and Magic*'s. Your party has a limited number of moves each day, during which you can find combat encounters, settlements, trading posts, tribal villages and more. Once your group is out of moves, it must make camp – the primary resource management aspect of *Conquistador,* but also its most mundane element.

During your travels, you will often encounter hostile natives. Or, as a Conquistador, you can be the aggressor. *Expeditions* uses an alternating turn-based combat system on a hexagon grid, but your character's attributes will play a role before combat even begins, as a party leader with a high level of scouting will be able to guide the team away from attackers. Such checks are not strictly pass or fail – even if the skill is not high enough to totally avoid danger, it still might be enough to create an advantage, such as high ground for your troops, more cover, the opportunity to lay traps, etc.

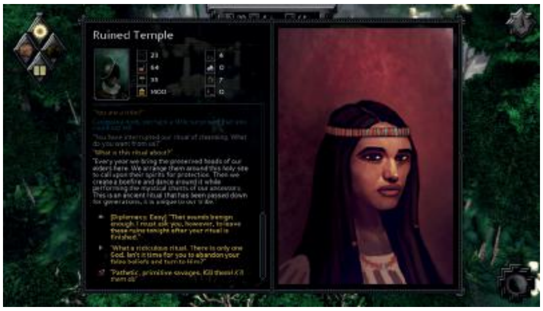
The main story in *Expeditions* is told through a series of text adventures. These events bring the world to life with wonderfully descriptive dialogues between your group and the natives. Attribute choices are felt to their fullest here – a high skill in diplomacy can prevent a war between two tribes, while a high skill in tactics could help you fight that war with minimal losses.

Expeditions: Conquistador attempts to bring a lot of different gameplay elements into a single experience. While it doesn't succeed in creating a complete package, there is a lot done well. Play for the unique setting and brilliantly subtle dialogue. Play to explore new worlds and meet wide-ranging characters. Most importantly, play to see an RPG in which character creation matters and the impact of your choices can constantly be felt. **SD**

Initially a text adventure for Windows phones, *Conquistador* was crowd-funded on Kickstarter in August 2012, raising a total of $77,247 and growing into a full RPG.



You can bring a party of up to six characters into combat, choosing from various combinations; every turn they can move and perform one action each



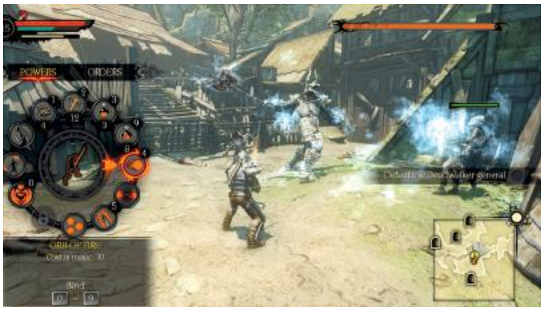
The personalities of characters in your party will play a big role, such as racist ones refusing to allow natives into the party, or religious ones protesting their rituals

Bound by Flame

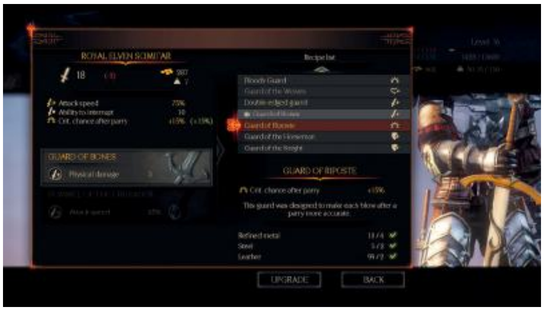
Spiders, 2014
Windows, PS3, PS4 and Xbox 360

French studio Spiders is one odd developer. Their first RPG, *Faery: Legends of Avalon* (2009), was an extremely unusual title, in which you play as a fairy, battle in JRPG-style turn-based combat and freely fly across maps such as the giant world tree Yggdrasil or the Flying Dutchman.

They followed with *Of Orcs and Men* (2011), a more "standard" kind of CRPG with RTwP combat, yet bold enough to cast players as the monsters – an Orc and a Goblin tasked with killing the human king. Then came *Mars: War Logs* (2013), an action RPG about a veteran soldier and a boy escaping prison in a dystopian sci-fi society ruled by Technomancers. All these games had exotic premises, but suffered heavily from tight budgets and some poor design choices.



Combat is in real time, but you can freely pause to cast spells, use items or give orders to your companion



The crafting system stands out and allows you to add or replace parts of your weapons and armour to customise them to your playstyle

Bound by Flame is an attempt to fix all that, polishing the systems from *Mars: War Logs* and solidifying their BioWare influences. The tight budget is still visible in things like how the game is divided into very small areas – similar to 2004's *Fable* – but the combat has been greatly enhanced, featuring three fighting styles (Warrior, Rogue and Pyromancer), as well as varied weapons, five romanceable companions, and a very well-done crafting/customisation system.

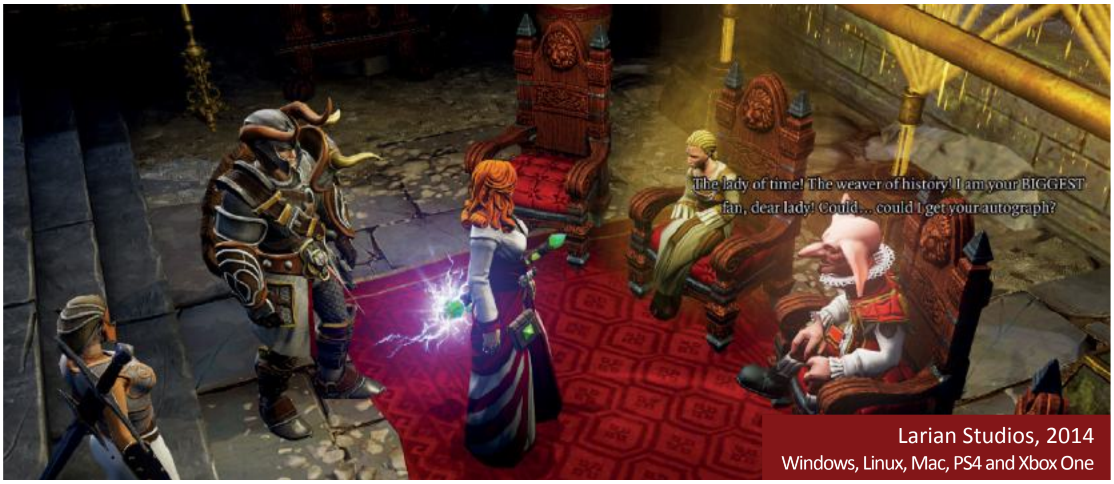
You play as a member of a mercenary company, taking a contract to help a group of cultists hold off against the evil Ice Lords and their undead scourge. Then things go wrong and you're possessed by a fire demon – this gives you new abilities, but you must often choose whether to keep your humanity or allow the demon more control in exchange for more power.

For the first two hours or so, *Bound by Flame* is an impressive game. But, sadly, as you go on, the same old problems begin to rear their heads. Combat and enemies quickly grow repetitive; there's too much backtracking; few choices matter; the pacing is inconsistent; it lacks polish; the game's quality declines as you advance. Spiders always had issues with endings, but here it's jarring how they abruptly conclude what should've been an epic saga.

All this makes *Bound by Flame* hard to recommend. While one of the best Spiders titles gameplay-wise, it's underwhelming next to AAA RPGs – worse, it lacks that exotic creativity that their previous games had. It shows the direction that Spiders would follow with *Greedfall* in 2019, but couldn't realise yet.

Still, it might be interesting for those just looking for a story-driven action RPG with decent combat, romances and all those BioWare-like elements. But if you're looking for something fresh, then I suggest giving *Of Orcs and Men* a try instead. **FE**

Divinity: Original Sin



The lady of time! The weaver of history! I am your BIGGEST fan, dear lady! Could... could I get your autograph?

Larian Studios, 2014
Windows, Linux, Mac, PS4 and Xbox One

The *Divinity* series isn't the story of a world, but an ambition. Since 1999, Larian Studios has had its sights on one thing – surpassing *Ultima VII*. It's been a bumpy road, with 2002's *Divine Divinity* biting off more than it could chew, and subsequent games being marked by fantastic, original ideas – be soulbound with an evil knight! Turn into a dragon! – often undercut by some shaky RPG foundations, and the ongoing battle to simply keep the lights on.

With *Divinity: Original Sin*, however, all the pieces finally came together. Kickstarter proved that the thirst and funding for classic-style RPGs was there, while a new approach to development provided a rock-solid foundation for Larian's crazier ideas, such as element-focused combat, chatting with rats in the dungeons, and – most ambitiously of all - giving players the power to not just explore the world, but try to break it.

The trick was to focus on multiplayer first – not purely with an eye to being a full multiplayer game, à la *Neverwinter Nights*, but also as a means of forcing the team to create systems and scripts capable of handling anything a chaotic player might try. Murder everyone in town? Abuse teleportation to skip a trigger? *Divinity* can handle it. Bosses, for instance, aren't immune to tricks like being teleported out of their arena. With the right spell, you can kill the final boss in one hit. In one of the best interactions, you can even run a two-man con on an NPC by engaging one in conversation while your partner loots their stuff.

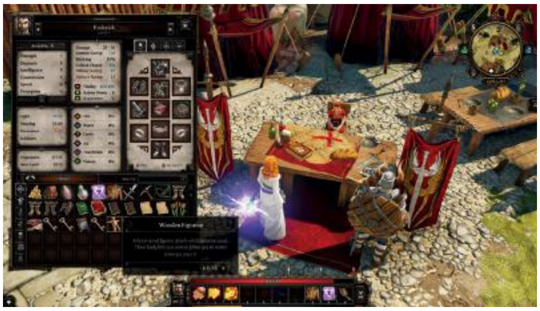
The result was a triumph. *D:OS* instantly validated Larian's hard work in the eyes of its critics, as well as delighting fans who'd been there for the long haul. The only major issue was the overall story, which was packed with fun moments but overall a bit of a mess, and lacking the instantly memorable characters we were used to from games like *Dragon Age* and *Ultima*.

Many of these issues were subsequently addressed in a major free update/re-release, the *Enhanced Edition*, which tweaked the plot to make more sense, altered the ending, and added controller support and a full voice-over into the mix.

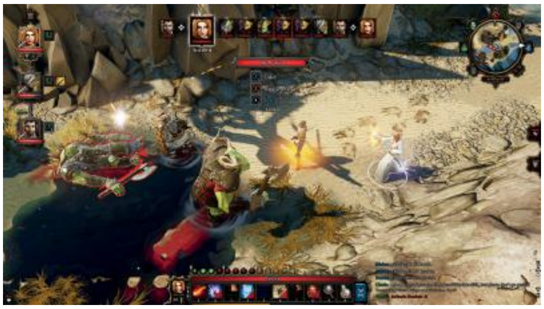
As for the big question of *Ultima VII*, it is of course an unfair challenge: any game going for that particular crown has to face not just the mundane reality of its code, but the Platonic ideal of it, spawned from decades of nostalgia.

With *Divinity: Original Sin*, however, Larian provided final proof that it was ready to go toe-to-toe with one of the RPG world's most sacred cows … and even teach the next generation a few new tricks of its own, perfecting the formula in their next game. **RC**

***D:OS* was crowd-funded on Kickstarter in 2013, raising $944,282. The game came out in 2014, and its *Enhanced Edition* followed in 2015.**

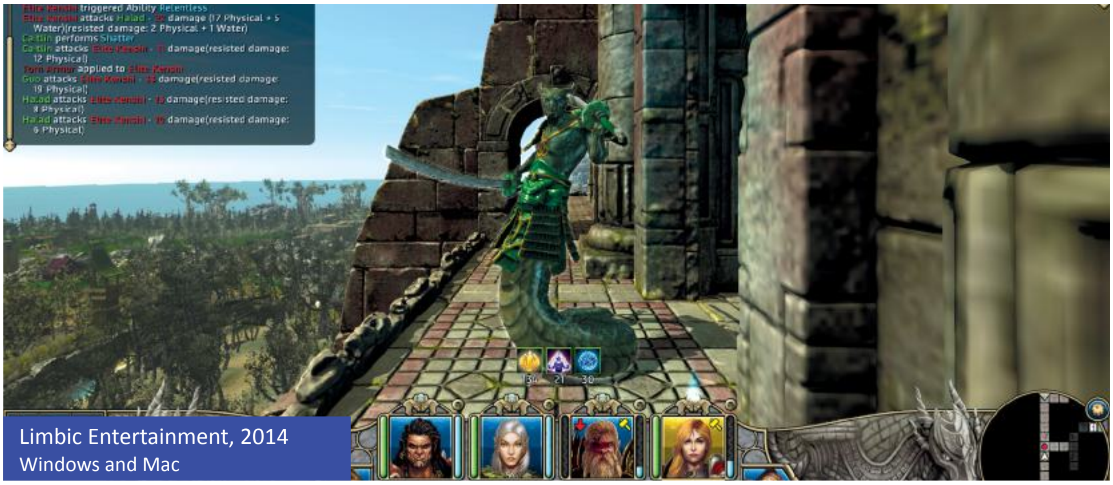


D:OS combines old and new ideas – a world where everything is interactive, like *Ultima*, but with two main characters, designed for co-op play



The turn-based combat allows you to use spells, objects and the environment to your advantage, teleporting enemies, igniting pools of oil or freezing wet creatures

Might and Magic X



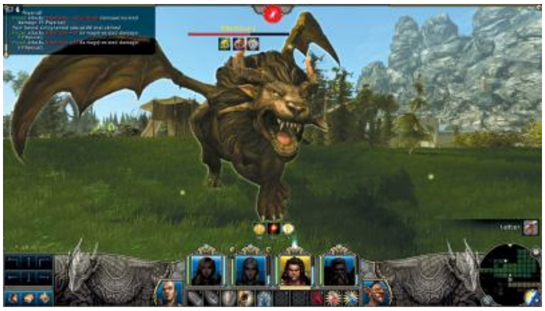
Limbic Entertainment, 2014
Windows and Mac

After the failure of *Might and Magic IX* in 2002, Ubisoft bought the series and kept making *Heroes of Might and Magic* games and spin-offs like *Dark Messiah: Might and Magic* (2006), but never returned to the main RPG series.

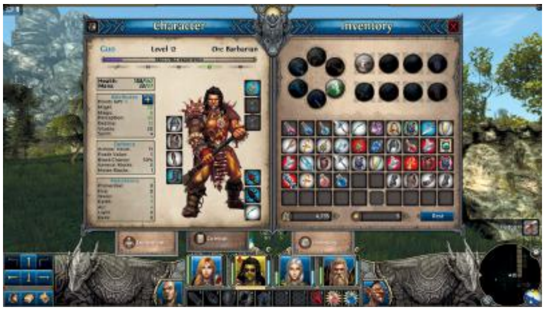
However, the unexpected popularity of *Legend of Grimrock* in 2011 led passionate developers at Limbic Entertainment to propose to Ubisoft an old-school RPG revival: *Might and Magic X - Legacy*.

You begin by creating a party of four heroes, choosing from Humans, Elves, Dwarves and Orcs, each with three unique classes. Faithful to the series, you can later hire up to two NPCs to help you with passive bonuses, learning additional skills and performing special quests to earn a class promotion.

***M&MX* only got one DLC, entitled *The Falcon & The Unicorn.* It adds a post-game dungeon that strips your party of all its high-level gear, and is much harder than the core game.**



The game offers a segmented open world with some gorgeous vistas; the day-night cycle also plays a role in some puzzles



You'll collect several rare relics and artefacts, as well as blessings that allow you to enter previously unreachable areas

Surprisingly, *M&MX* abandons the free 3D movement of *M&MVI* to *IX,* replacing it with a very old-school grid-based system in which the party moves square-by-square. In spite of this dungeon crawler-ish gameplay, the game features an open world, with towns, forests and mountains to explore.

Comparing it with other open-world titles, it's closer to *Gothic* than *Skyrim,* as you can wander freely (some roadblocks aside), but enemies in certain areas will tear inexperienced parties apart.

While exploring the world, you'll come across monsters, side-quests, merchants, optional dungeons, secrets, puzzles and the series' usual trainer NPCs, which are necessary to improve your skill tier.

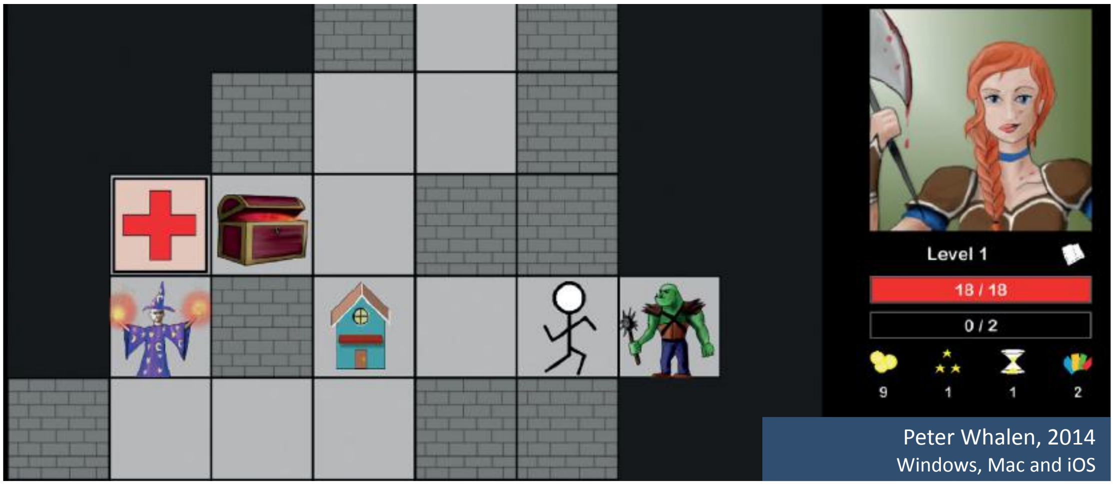
In line with its old-school ambitions, the game also returns to turn-based combat. Battles can be very challenging, and there are plenty of skills, spells and status effects to handle, making *M&MX* arguably the most tactical game in the series, despite a rather annoying over-reliance on unfair ambushes.

From a graphical point of view, the whole game was built on a tight budget, reusing many assets from *Heroes of Might and Magic VI*. And it shows, alternating very pleasant landscapes with really bad textures. On the whole, however, exploring the various areas and environments is a satisfying experience.

Unfortunately, the game is very badly optimised, leading to frequent frame rate drops and graphical issues, plus other annoying bugs. Ubisoft's Uplay store and invasive DRM can also be a hassle.

Overall, *Might and Magic X - Legacy* is a good and surprisingly old-school RPG. Clearly developed by fans of the series, it offers modern accessibility improvements, but also high difficulty and complex systems. Sadly, it sold poorly, so Ubisoft pulled the plug and another sequel is unlikely. **AM**

Dream Quest



Peter Whalen, 2014
Windows, Mac and iOS

It is undeniable that CRPGs and tabletop RPGs are very distinct experiences, each with their own strengths and focus. Digital trading card games, on the other hand, mostly play like direct ports of their tabletop counterparts – an easier alternative to actually meeting other players and buying hundreds of cards.

That might be why 1997's *Magic: The Gathering* PC game, commonly called *Shandalar*, remains such a cult classic. It kept the rules and complexity of *MtG* but, instead of just duelling other players and buying booster packs, you could explore an isometric fantasy world, visit towns to buy cards, do quests, solve riddles and explore dungeons to battle foes with special rules.

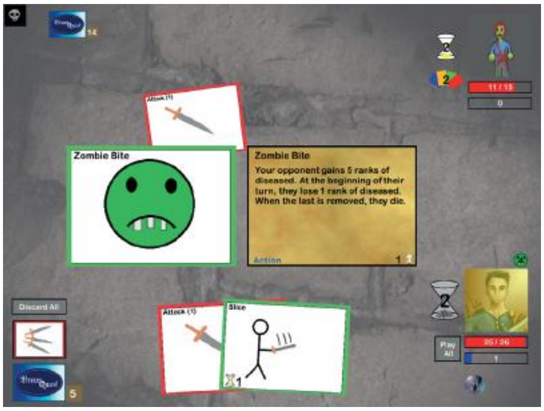
Dream Quest understands that appeal, making full use of the fact that it's a single-player digital card game. It doesn't need to be balanced for PvP, or put its cards in booster packs for you to grind and collect. You simply choose a class, then explore a dungeon, fighting increasingly stronger enemies to earn XP and gold. Each enemy offers unique challenges, such as ghouls that are immune to damage but rot away after a few turns, or liches that require a specific card to defeat.

Yes, that's heavily one-sided, often frustratingly so. But that's where the fun of its Roguelike aspect comes in: the entire game is based around trying to build a strong deck while surviving whatever wicked tricks enemies throw at you. You never know which cards you'll get, or who you'll face. Fail and you'll restart from zero. Since the game is short, that's usually just a few minutes, leading to an addictive replay loop.

Each run starts simply, with a deck of six to ten cards that you draw from and reshuffle each turn. It then introduces card upgrades, status effects, mana and several unique mechanics. It's deep, but still perfectly suited for playing on the phone during a commute, with several unlockables to keep players coming back.

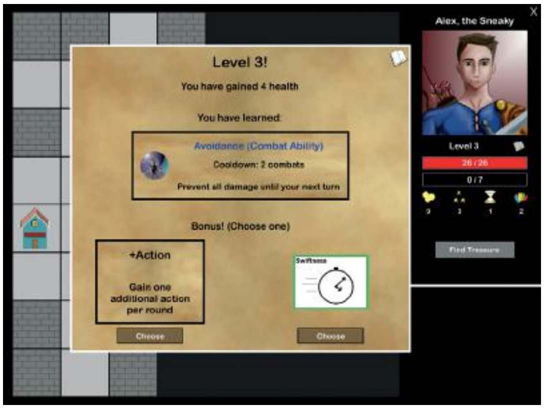
The result is that this crude-looking iOS game created a brand new genre: deck-building Roguelikes. The concept reached the mainstream with *Slay the Spire* in 2018 and has been followed by many iterations since, such as *Dicey Dungeons* (2019), *Erannorth Reborn* (2019), *Monster Train* (2020) and *Griftlands* (2021). So don't be put off by its simple graphics and humble origins, *Dream Quest* remains a fun and challenging game that fully displays its sub-genre's strengths. **FE**

***Dream Quest* was first released for iOS in 2014, then ported to PCs in 2015. Its developer, Peter Whalen, was then hired to work on Blizzard's *Hearthstone*.**


Zombie Bite

Your opponent gains 5 ranks of diseased. At the beginning of their turn, they lose 1 rank of diseased. When the last is removed, they die.

Dream Quest was heavily inspired by tabletop deckbuilding games like *Dominion* and *Ascension*, which began appearing in the late 2000s


Level 3!

You have gained 4 health

You have learned:

Avoidance (Combat Ability)

Cooldown: 2 combats

Prevent all damage until your next turn

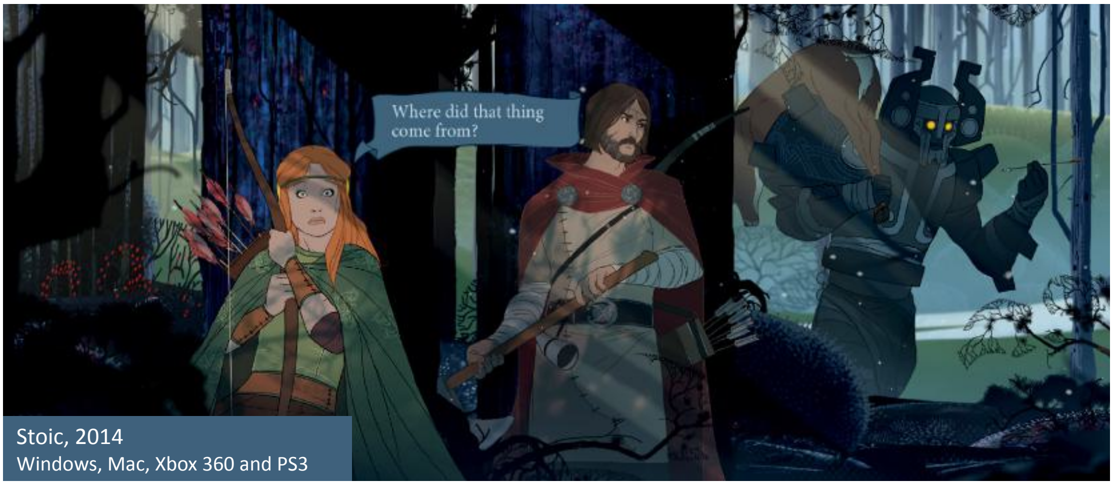
Bonus! (Choose one)

+Action

Gain one additional action per round

You start by picking one of several classes, each with a distinct play style; as you level up, you'll unlock new skills and card options

The Banner Saga

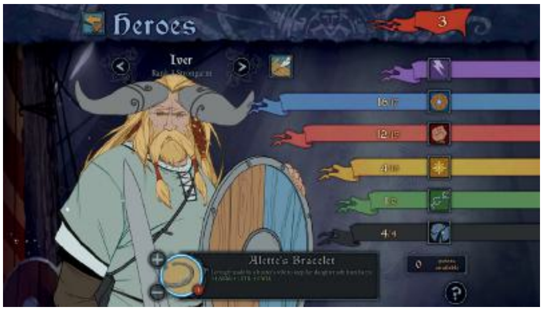


Stoic, 2014
Windows, Mac, Xbox 360 and PS3

The gods are dead, the sun has stopped moving, and now stone giants are raiding villages. This apocalyptic scenario is how *The Banner Saga* begins. Developed by a trio of ex-BioWare developers, it was one of the first big crowd-funded games, raising $723,886 on Kickstarter in March 2012, a mere month after *Double Fine Adventure* appeared.

I was a backer, and it's hard to explain today how bold their pitch was. Indie games were still novel and mostly stuck on retro pixel art, while turn-based games were considered outdated (this was before 2012's *XCOM* helped revive the genre). And yet, just three guys were developing a trilogy of tactical RPGs with branching choices and a gorgeous 2D art inspired by Eyvind Earle's work on Disney's *Sleeping Beauty*.

Released in 2014, the game can be split into three major elements: story decisions, caravan management, and tactical combat. Despite being a tactical RPG, *Banner Saga*'s combat is rather controversial: units have armour, which absorbs damage, and health, which also doubles as the unit's damage – so wounded units are weaker. That's not bad; the problem is that the game uses a bizarre alternating turn system – if the enemy has two units and you have four, enemy units will play twice each. So killing a weak enemy means a stronger enemy now acts more often, punishing the player.



Each hero has six stats and an equipment slot, levelling up as they kill enemies; it's a simple system, that is functional but at its limit by the third game

It's an obnoxious system, which dictates a strategy of wounding all enemies before killing any. The entire trilogy suffers from this, but the first game is particularly bad, due to poor enemy variety. You'll get used to it, but it stops the combat from being truly satisfying.

Still, it doesn't ruin the game, for its combat's true purpose is to frame the story. You alternate between two groups of characters – a hunter with his daughter, and a group of giants escorting a prince – as they try to survive the ongoing apocalypse. Along the way you'll have to make several choices, such as sharing food with other survivors or not. Some of these will bring heavy consequences, as over 20 unique characters can join you, abandon you or die, depending on your choices.

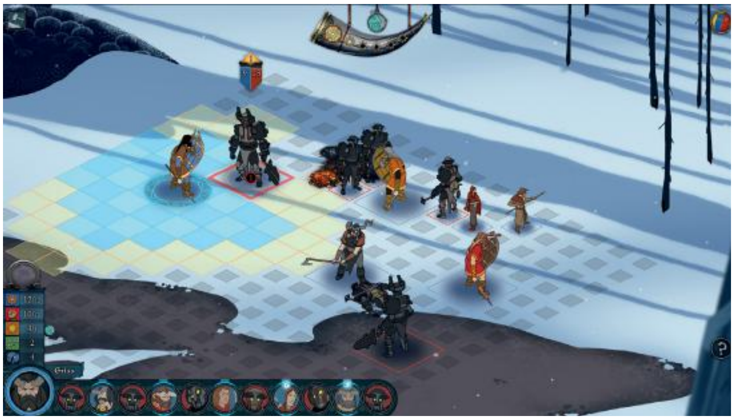
That's one of the biggest strengths of *Banner Saga*: its characters are believable and charismatic, but also actually vulnerable to your decisions – you might lose your favourite fighter right before an important battle.

As the story progresses, your caravan will travel across the world, rescuing villagers and dealing with random *Oregon's Trail*-like events, such as thieves stealing supplies. It's the weakest part of the game, barely impacting anything – the villagers don't fight and the game won't react even if they all starve to death.

Released two years after the first game, *The Banner Saga 2* allows you to import your save file and continue from where the story left off. This means not only that some characters might be dead, depending on your choices, but that even the game's protagonist might be different. It is a daring choice, which lends weight to player choices, but also a massive burden for the developers, who now must write for two very distinct protagonists. The solution was a compromise: the main story is exactly the same for both, but some unique events and additional lines manage to make them feel distinct enough, especially in tone.

"I was working at BioWare with my friends Alex Thomas and John Watson when the iPad came out. On the iPad was this totally cool game called *Superbrothers: Sword & Sworcery*, and it was done by a small team. After working in large game development for 11 years we really wanted a change, so we determined to do a small game with just us, three guys."

– Arnie Jorgensen,
Stoic Co-founder



Each character has willpower points that they can spend to use special abilities, hit harder or move farther than normal, as shown by the yellow grid

Unfortunately, the story itself is a step backwards compared to the first game's. As the middle of a trilogy, it's so focused on setting up the finale that it nullifies player choices in order to force certain events to happen. It also drags, having the same 8- to 10-hour length as the first game, but very little real story progression.

While its story is a mixed bag, gameplay-wise the sequel is a solid improvement. New enemies and characters were added, bringing much-needed variety to encounters, which now feature destructible obstacles and richer background art. Caravan management also saw improvements, but still fails to be interesting.

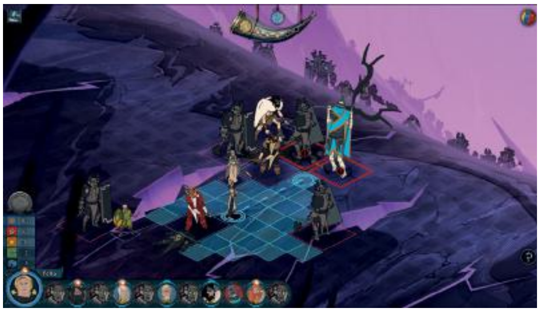
While the second part was self-funded, Stoic returned to Kickstarter for the final part of the trilogy. The campaign began in January 2017, already past the golden age of crowd-funding, raising $416,986 – less than half of what they had achieved before. But it was enough, and *The Banner Saga 3* came out in 2018.

The pros and cons of crowd-funding are heavily felt, as the series' art and animation reach their peak, but the extra characters promised as stretch goals are awkwardly thrown in. In fact, as a whole, the writing is at its weakest – where part two felt devoid of important events, part three throws them at you one after another, with no time to really explore them, often just adding filler battles between events to balance the pace.

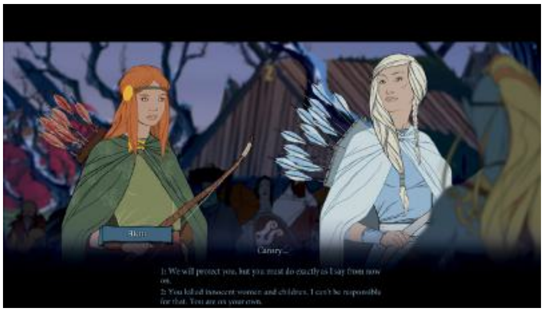
By the trilogy's finale, the player has a massive roster of heroes, but the new enemies are mostly just re-skins, failing to raise the stakes or challenge players. Similarly, new battle mechanics, like enemy waves and environmental hazards, don't add much to the game.

The real improvement was replacing the caravan with a system whereby your actions, battles and choices with one party of heroes buy time for the other party to fulfill its goals. It's a much more involved system and fits the trilogy perfectly, taking your entire saga into account – choices, the heroes that lived and died, and even how many villagers your caravan had. This feeling of seeing choices across multiple games tie together into a conclusion is extremely powerful and rare, and that by itself might be enough reason to try the trilogy.

The Banner Saga first appeared at the height of the Kickstarter craze, a bold indie title going against all industry norms with its 2D art and animation, turn-based combat, and narrative focus. Its success helped prove the viability of indie RPGs and was directly responsible for a new wave of tactical RPGs, such as *Tahira: Echoes of the Astral Empire* (2016) and *Ash of Gods: Redemption* (2018). The second and third parts of the trilogy didn't achieve the same cultural impact, but the entire saga is an impressive achievement, and a must-play for fans of narrative-driven games. **FE**



The second part succeeds in adding more enemy diversity and encounters with interesting art and mechanics



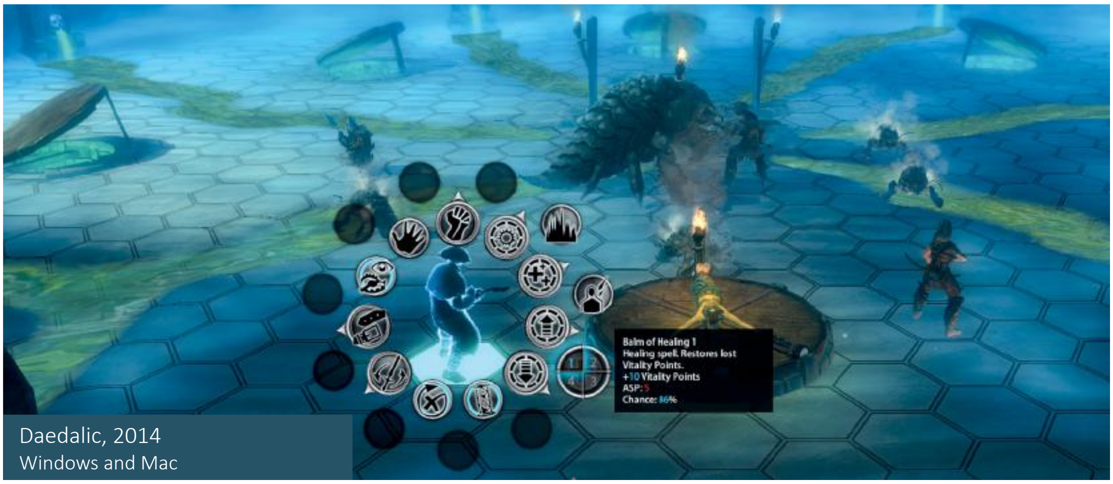
Canary...

1: We will protect you, but you must do exactly as I say from now on.

2: You killed innocent women and children. I can't be responsible for that. You are on your own.

The third game explores several choices made in the first two games, making it rewarding to play the entire trilogy

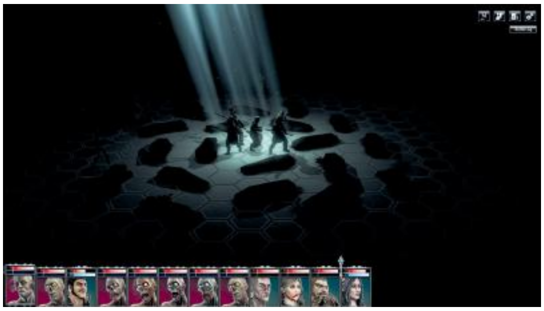
Blackguards



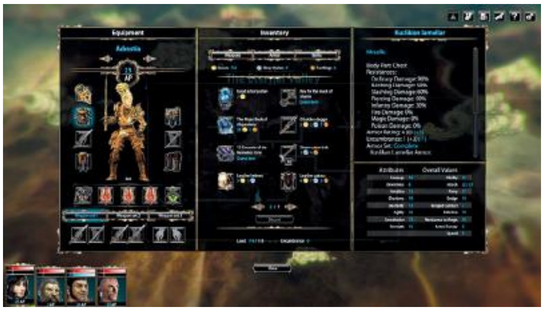
Daedalic, 2014
Windows and Mac

Known for old-school point-and-click adventure games such as *Deponia* and *Edna & Harvey*, German developer Daedalic took gamers by surprise by releasing *Blackguards* – a tactical turn-based RPG based on the *Dark Eye* tabletop ruleset.

While the story sells itself as a dark narrative in which you play an outlaw, it's rather clichéd and heroic. The *Dark Eye* ruleset is the true draw. While some of it was cut, such as most non-combat talents, it retains a solid and complex (if rather intimidating) classless system, offering ample freedom when creating your character. It's a joy for hardcore players, but very poorly explained for newcomers, and the forced party members end up limiting some of your party-building possibilities – sometimes even forcing a restart.



The game excels in its diverse combat scenarios, like battling zombies in a crypt lit only by occasional lightning strikes



The character system is complex and allows for a lot of customisation, but *Blackguards* is sadly lacking in equipment variety

Blackguards knows its limitations and uses some unconventional design choices to compensate for them, betting everything on its battles – cities are presented as simple animated backgrounds with stores and NPCs to talk with; exploration is limited to a 2D world map full of icons; dungeons are but a semi-linear sequence of battles without rest; and the story is told via simple cutscenes, with an occasional decision to be made. This leads to a unique "Western *Final Fantasy Tactics*" feel, and while the game's first hours are very linear, it later opens up a wide range of interesting side-quests.

Daedalic's background as an adventure game developer is felt here in an unusual way. There are no random battles in *Blackguards*, meaning that every encounter happens in a unique arena specifically designed for it, often with unique challenges or tactical puzzles. There are traps, time limits, holes that spawn enemies, movable and destructible objects, healing orbs, falling chandeliers, mechanical blades, flying dragons, swamp gas, giant tentacles, mind-controlling plants, drawbridges, collapsing passageways, a giant cage on a crane, etc. There's not a single RPG out there that offers so many interesting combat scenarios.

This alone makes *Blackguards* a must-play for any tactical fan – or RPG designer. Unfortunately, the game stretches out for far too long (40 to 60 hours), and the limited variety of enemies and equipment results in a rather stale second half of the game.

Even more unfortunate was Daedalic's failure to realise what made the game fun. *Blackguards 2* (2015) streamlined the RPG elements to focus on an ambitious strategic campaign, and the tightly crafted encounters were replaced by poorly balanced battles against hordes of respawning enemies. It pleased reviewers, but not players, selling only a fraction of what the first game achieved, and likely ending the *Blackguards* series. **FE**

Transistor

Supergiant Games, 2014
Windows, Linux, Mac and PS4

Role-playing games usually try to find a balance between world-building and game mechanics, but very few try to merge them. *Transistor* is an intriguing attempt at doing so. At first glance, it uses the same concepts as *Bastion,* with an ominous narrator, real-time combat and a strong reliance on music for storytelling. But it quickly demonstrates its own individuality.

The story revolves around Red, a singer living in the retro-futuristic city of Cloudbank. Escaping from a murder attempt, she comes into possession of the Transistor, a tremendously powerful sword. With this blade in hand, your goal is to understand the mystery behind it and stop the Process, an army of robots bent on destroying Cloudbank. Confusing in some aspects but very straightforward at heart, the storytelling succeeds in creating a touching experience.

Programming terminology cleverly parallels every game concept and shapes Cloudbank into a unique setting. Music, in particular, is the key to *Transistor*'s identity, tying to Red's character, evolving according to the situation and retelling the story through songs. Needless to say, the soundtrack is gorgeous.

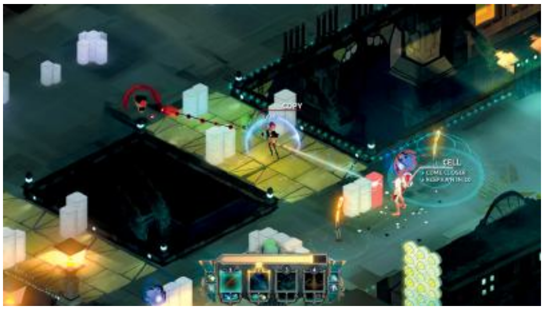
Using an isometric point of view, you guide Red and her huge blueish sword through the gorgeous landscapes of Cloudbank, fighting various units of the Process on your way. Combat is in real time and four functions (special attacks) can be equipped, from quick shots to massive area attacks. The catch is that enemies are fast and possess various types of annoying ability, and some might even respawn.

This is where the Transistor's powers become useful. By activating a power called TURN(), Red can stop time to plan and queue actions in advance. Once ready, your plan is instantly executed and a cool-down, before you can use TURN() again, begins.

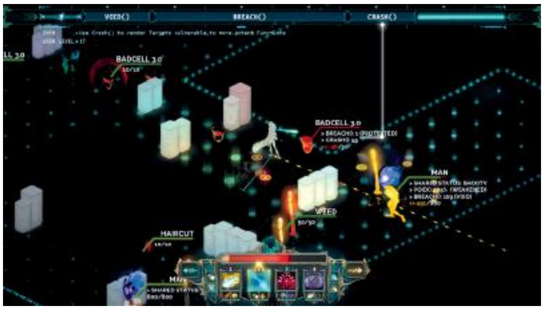
Experience expands Red's powers by opening secondary slots or providing new functions. The latter can be equipped as direct attacks, as improvements on other functions or as passive bonuses. For example, Red's initial function CRASH() is just a powerful blow, but in an upgrade slot it stuns enemies, and used in a passive slot it makes you immune to slowing effects.

There are 16 functions in total and experimenting is super-fun. Some combinations are overpowered, but you can also use handicaps, which make the enemies stronger but assure you some nice experience bonuses.

The most compelling aspect of *Transistor* is how everything blends together: its beautiful soundtrack, gorgeous art direction, interesting world-building and surprising battles. Even if it's a short game. **TR**

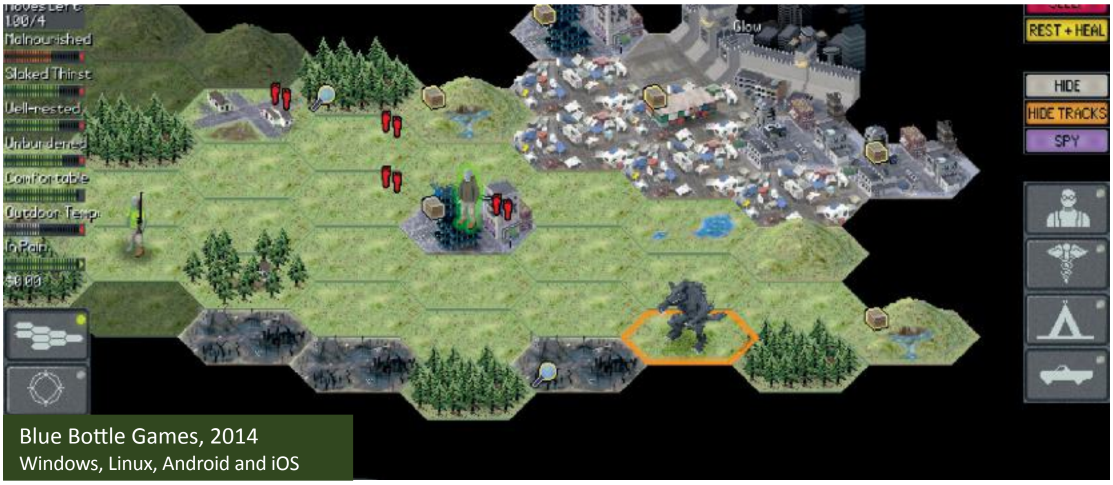


The beautiful world is shown through an isometric viewpoint; combat is in real time, and you can equip up to four active skills at once



When TURN() is activated, the game pauses, allowing you to plan and instantly execute a short sequence of actions

NEO Scavenger



Blue Bottle Games, 2014
Windows, Linux, Android and iOS

After *NEO Scavenger,* Blue Bottle Games began working on *Ostranauts*, which expands on the same gameplay approach, this time inside a spaceship.

At a quick glance, *NEO Scavenger* is just a Flash-based Roguelike developed by a one-man team. However, like an expert scavenger, it knows how to make the most of its limited resources and manages to create something truly valuable.

You start by choosing your character's traits. The game uses an advantage and disadvantage system that should be familiar to *GURPS* fans, allowing you to gain points by picking negative traits (Insomniac, Feeble, Myopia, etc.) and spend points on positive traits (Tough, Hacking, Tracking, Botany, etc.). While not as complex as other character systems, these will heavily alter each character's choices and playstyle.

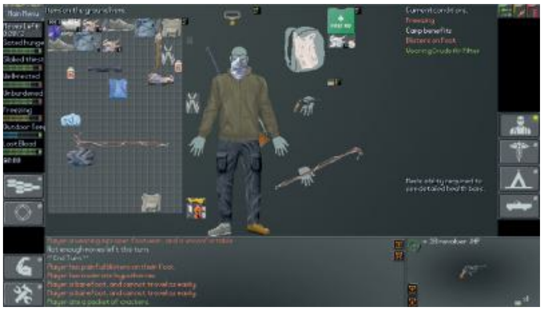
Once that's done, you wake up from cryogenic sleep, only to find out that the world went to hell. Now you're in the middle of a post-apocalyptic Michigan, wearing only a medical gown, a weird amulet and a wrist strap labelled "Philip Kindred", and it's up to you to figure out what happened and why you were frozen, and find clothing and food – but not in that order.

NEO Scavenger's defining feature is that it's a rather experimental game, mixing survival-Roguelike gameplay with Choose-Your-Own-Adventure segments, and having a unique approach to presentation.

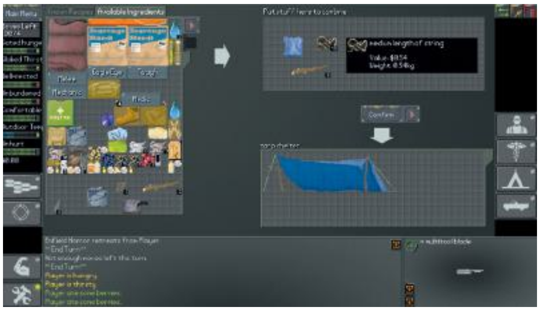
Combat, for example, is turn-based and doesn't feature a single frame of animation. Instead, you select commands, such as "shoot", "kick" or "sneak towards", and the combat log will describe what happened. While this may seem crude, it allows for actions that even triple-A games find too complex to animate, such as head-butting, leg tripping and even grappling (with mods) – all while pushing a shopping cart.

Still, the most interesting aspect of the game is how it obfuscates its stats. *NEO Scavenger* never tells you how many hit points you or your enemy have, how much damage a weapon does or to what extent a concussion or a fever affects you. Everything is up to your own judgement. You don't replace your baseball bat with that machete you just found because the game says it does +10% fire damage, but rather because you – the player – feel safer with it.

These are some very bold design decisions, especially in this graphics- and DPS-driven era. More importantly, they succeed in transmitting a unique sense of tension, as you mentally visualise yourself rolling in the mud, tired and wounded, attacking another desperate survivor with a tree branch and wondering who will drop dead first.

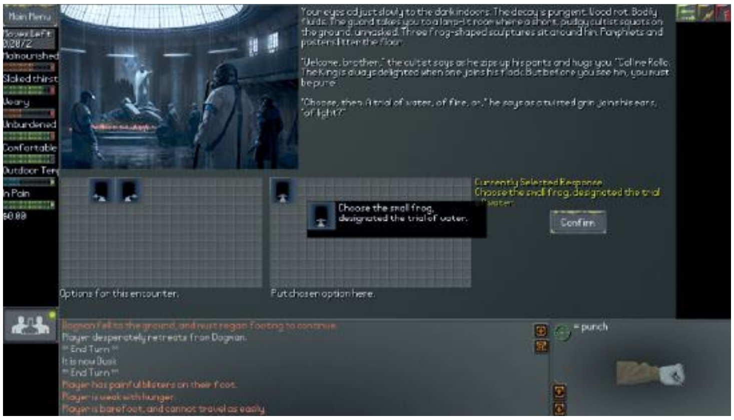


Items degrade, plastic bags rip open and there's never enough room to carry everything you want – or need



The crafting system is very elaborate and intuitive, which is good, because using it is vital for your survival

> "I think some folks prefer stats, and stats definitely have their place. But I wanted to see how it felt hiding that stuff to make it more about judgement calls and play experience. That, and the absence of information makes us fill in the gaps with our own interpretations. Usually those are cooler than anything I could come up with!"
>
> – *Daniel Fedor,*
> NEO Scavenger*'s creator*



Your eyes adjust slowly to the dark indoors. The decay is pungent. Blood rot. Bodily fluids. The guard takes you to a lamp-lit room where a short, pudgy cultist squats on the ground, unmasked. Three frog-shaped sculptures sit around him. Pamphlets and posters litter the floor.

"Welcome, brother," the cultist says as he zips up his pants and hugs you. "Call me Rollo. The King is always delighted when one joins his flock. But before you see him, you must be pure."

"Choose, then. A trial of water, of fire, or," he says as a twisted grin joins his ears, "of light?"

Currently Selected Response:
Choose the small frog, designated the trial of water.

Choose the small frog, designated the trial of water.

Dogman fell to the ground, and must regain footing to continue.
Player desperately retreats from Dogman.
** End Turn **
It is now Dusk
** End Turn **
Player has painful blisters on their feet.
Player is weak with hunger
Player is barefoot, and cannot travel as easily

The game's CYOA segments have great writing and atmosphere, but can kill you without warning, forcing a restart

Every aspect of *NEO Scavenger* follows this logic. The game features a robust survival system that requires you to regularly eat, drink, sleep, treat your wounds, protect yourself from the cold and medicate against diseases. Of course, not all water you find is safe for drinking, and eating meat without cooking it might be a bad idea. Even something like wearing two right-foot boots can result in blisters and affect you negatively. Is it worse than walking around barefoot? It's up to you to figure it out.

Along the way, you'll die – a lot. But it's OK, the fun in *NEO Scavenger* lies precisely in learning how to survive this harsh post-apocalyptic world. The many characters you create will never gain experience nor level up, but after a while you – the player – will learn how to scavenge, craft items, assess risks and survive for a few days without dying of hypothermia.

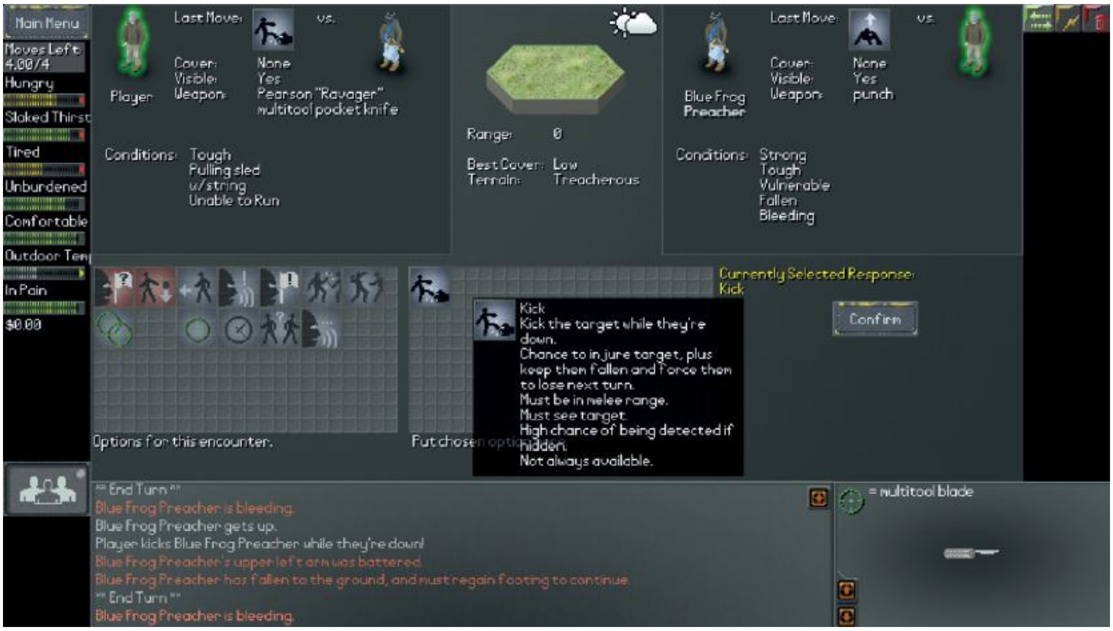
At that point, you might then be ready to begin searching for answers, to discover out what happened to the world, to explore its borders, interact with its inhabitants and follow whispered rumours towards the game's cryptic main quest. Or become a cannibal. It's a dog-eat-dog world out there. **FE**

Mods:

Extended NeoScav: Expands the game in every way, adding new traits, crafting recipes, combat moves, factions, items, quests, locations and even a rideable bicycle, plus a few well-thought-out balance changes.

Mighty (mini)Mod of Doom: Despite the name, this also adds a huge amount of content and rebalancing.

Science & Sorcery: This WIP mod aims to give a *Shadowrun*-ish feel, adding magic to the game.



Player
Cover: None
Visible: Yes
Weapon: Pearson "Ravager" multitool pocket knife
Conditions: Tough, Pulling sled w/string, Unable to Run

Range: 0
Best Cover: Low
Terrain: Treacherous

Blue Frog Preacher
Cover: None
Visible: Yes
Weapon: punch
Conditions: Strong, Tough, Vulnerable, Fallen, Bleeding

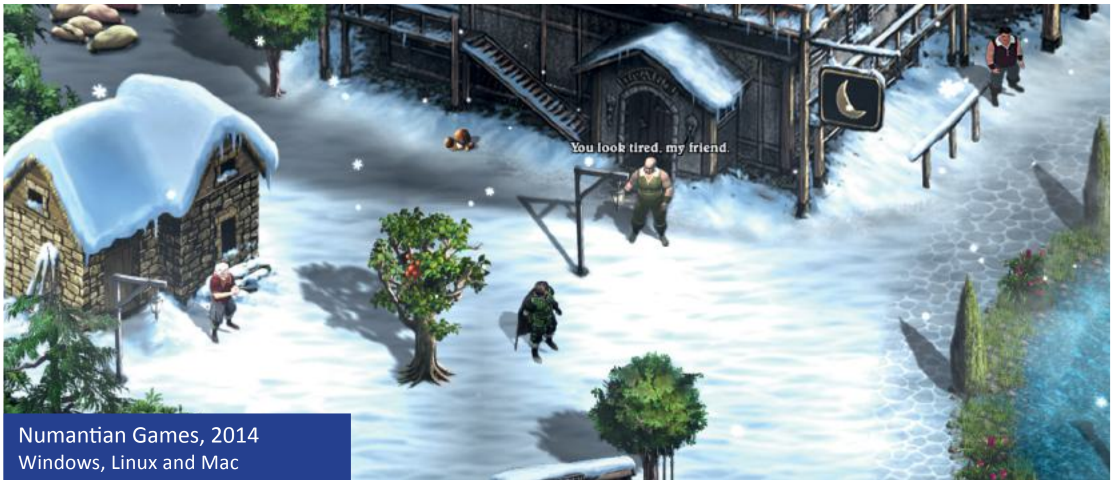
Currently Selected Response:
Kick

Kick
Kick the target while they're down.
Chance to injure target, plus keep them fallen and force them to lose next turn.
Must be in melee range.
Must see target.
High chance of being detected if hidden.
Not always available.

** End Turn **
Blue Frog Preacher is bleeding.
Blue Frog Preacher gets up.
Player kicks Blue Frog Preacher while they're down!
Blue Frog Preacher's upper left arm was battered.
Blue Frog Preacher has fallen to the ground, and must regain footing to continue.
** End Turn **
Blue Frog Preacher is bleeding.

The abstract combat screen allows for unusual and elaborate scenes to take place, such as kicking a religious fanatic while pulling a plastic sledge

Lords of Xulima

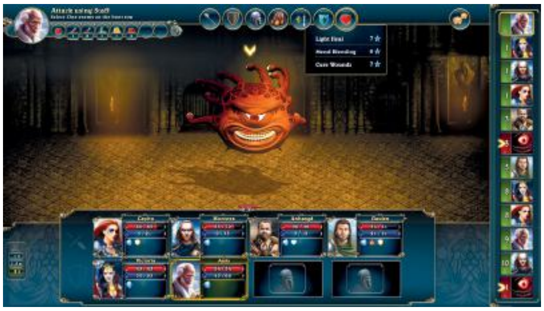


Numantian Games, 2014
Windows, Linux and Mac

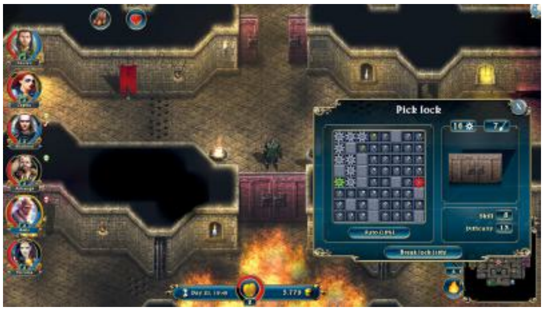
***Lords of Xulima* raised $35,000 on Kickstarter in 2013. Backers got the *Talisman of Golot* DLC, but beware: this can make the game too easy.**

With the rise of crowd-funding, developers began to cater to a nostalgic audience by making "spiritual sequels" of classic RPGs. Sadly, many of these projects became hollow copies: games that mimic visuals, mechanics and themes, but fail to deliver that intangible quality of the originals.

Numantian Games, a small, six-man studio from Spain, did exactly the opposite. *Lords of Xulima* doesn't look like any classic RPG, but definitely plays like one. The game tells the story of Gaulen the Explorer, a man chosen to travel to the land of Xulima, cleanse the sacred temples and help the gods return to the world. In an unusual twist, you don't create or customise Gaulen – instead, you create the five party members who will accompany him, choosing from nine classes.



Combat can be very challenging, with monsters destroying your party using nasty status effects; use the *Deepest Dark* mod for the ultimate challenge



Xulima uses two mini-games for lock-picking and trap-disarming; they require character skill, player reflex and scarce resources

Combat is turn-based and in first-person, similar to *Might and Magic*'s, but with some tweaks. Characters position themselves on a 2 × 4 grid and can only attack adjacent units, resulting in a "tactical blobber". It's also quite challenging, and makes heavy use of status effects – wounds reduce stats, bleeding does damage every turn, stuns delay characters' actions, etc. This depth is combined with a large bestiary to create a nice variety of encounters, keeping battles interesting.

Exploration, however, is *Xulima*'s main strength. You walk around, controlling Gaulen from an isometric perspective, exploring huge and cleverly-designed maps. Each area has its share of mazes, treasures and hidden passages, all covered with a thick fog-of-war that makes exploration feel rewarding.

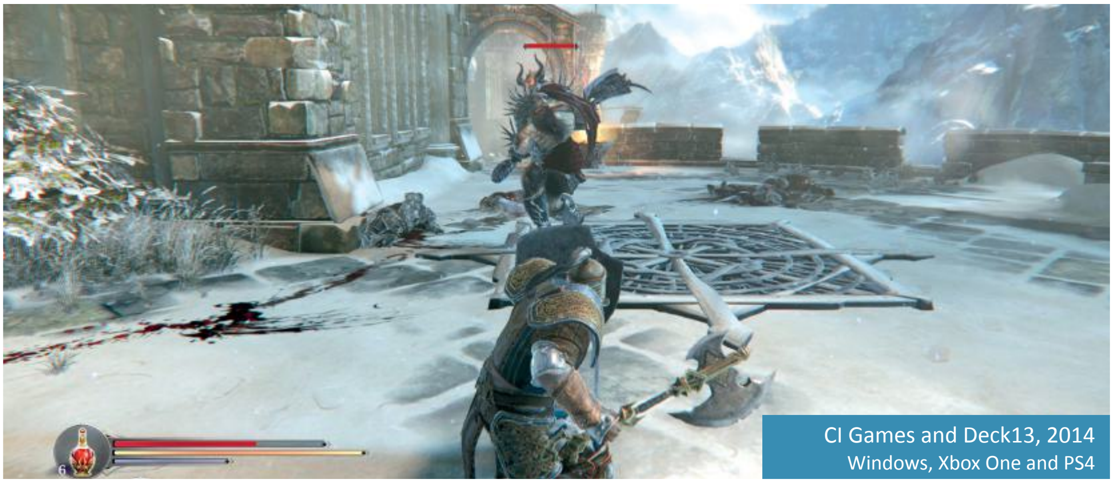
The diversity of environments is staggering, and every area has its own gameplay trick: a labyrinth of poisonous mushrooms; a frozen tundra that quickly exhausts your food; a dungeon full of Tesla coils; a deadly monster that must be avoided; a burning forest; a teleporter maze; a lava lake; a massive desert …

These are complemented by bold design choices. The world is huge and mostly open, with tough enemies serving as progress gates. Random encounters are finite and occur only in some areas, with other areas (where saving is disabled) reserved for special puzzles. The constant need for food keeps exploration tense, and money remains important during the entire game.

However, too much ambition can be a bad thing. *Xulima* is far too long – over 70 hours – and declines in the second half. Character progression stagnates, areas feel empty, recoloured enemies appear in volume and the narrative never goes beyond "purify all temples".

Regardless, *Lords of Xulima* remains impressive – it's a passionate tribute to classic, old-school RPGs, but it achieves this while being its own, unique game. **FE**

Lords of the Fallen



CI Games and Deck13, 2014
Windows, Xbox One and PS4

Despite its developers' best efforts to state otherwise, *Lords of the Fallen* went down in history as the first "*Souls*-like". The game is an action RPG focused on intense battles, which require a thoughtful approach, the patience to wait for an opening and careful management of your Stamina bar. Everything, from the controls to the deadly boss battles and even how enemies respawn when you die, will remind you of From Software's *Souls* series.

That's not to say the game doesn't try new things. Most notably, it features a defined protagonist – you always play as Harkyn, a brutish prisoner released to help battle an invading army of demons. All you can choose is his starting class (Warrior, Rogue or Cleric), plus one of three magic types, which are very limited and entirely secondary in this melee-oriented game.

One of the game's best twists is the XP multiplier, which increases with each kill and remains until you rest, challenging players to push as far as possible. Other additions include a combo system based on timing your strikes, runes you can socket into weapons, a magical gauntlet that fires projectiles, and challenge rooms you can complete for special items.

The visuals also stand out, as the graphics are truly impressive. The art-style is gritty and intentionally over-designed, clearly inspired by Games Workshop's *Warhammer*. The game's first enemy is a huge, armour-clad demon. It's cool, but somewhat contrived: the endgame foes look much weaker, compromising the usual "rats to dragons" RPG progression.

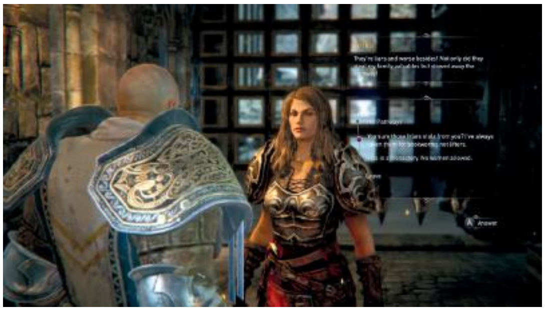
While visually stunning and full of interesting ideas, *Lords of the Fallen* does feel limited. The story is forgettable, but the real letdown is that there are few unique weapons and movesets, few enemies to fight, few areas to explore and, above all, very few reasons to ever replay the game once you're done.

It must be said that this isn't a bad game by any means, but it's impossible not to compare it with the *Souls* games and notice its shortcomings. The core elements are present, but they lack the depth and unique flair that From Software adds to its games.

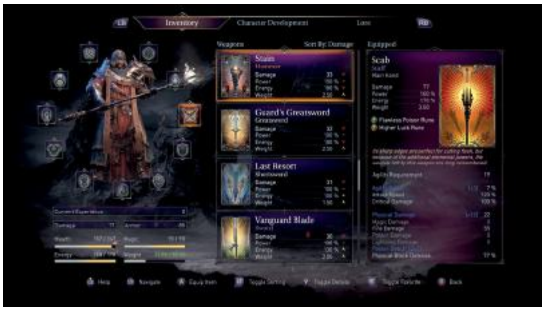
This gave *Lords of the Fallen* a bad image at first – and it surely didn't help that it came with a new type of DRM that led to instability and performance issues for many PC players. In the years since its release, "*Dark Souls* clones" have become their own sub-genre; even Deck13 would make a few more with *The Surge* (2017) and its acclaimed 2019 sequel, *The Surge 2*.

Lords of the Fallen was heavily criticised for being a clone but, in hindsight, it was a good first try and still one of the best *Souls*-likes out there. **FE**

In 2014, CI Games announced that a *Lords of the Fallen* sequel would be released in 2017. In 2021 they confirmed that it's still in development.

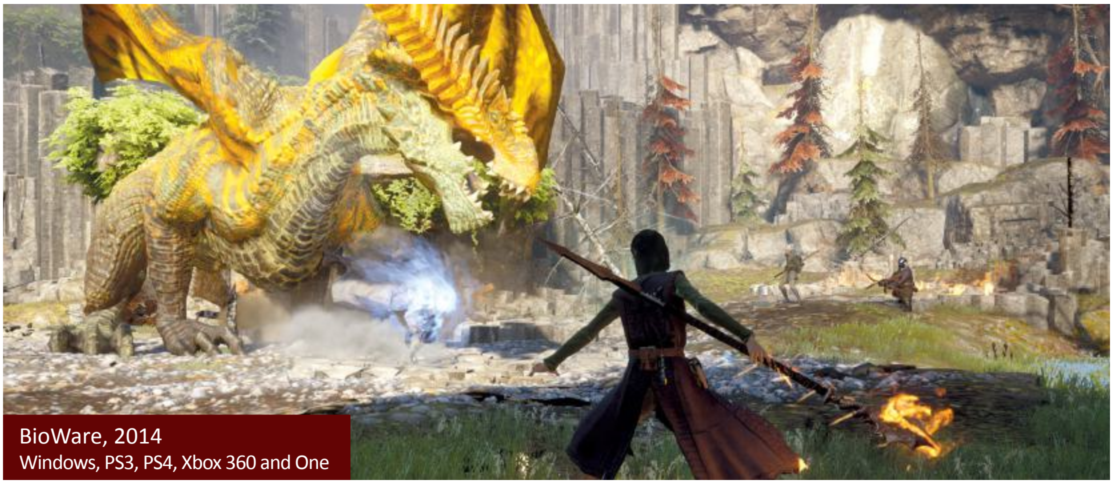


There are a few NPCs and dialogue choices in the game, but they are forgettable and of little consequence



There's a good selection of equipment, but it follows a linear progression, effectively limiting your choices

Dragon Age: Inquisition



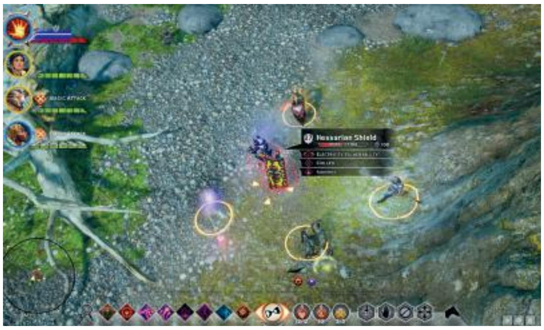
BioWare, 2014
Windows, PS3, PS4, Xbox 360 and One

The Dragon Age series is undoubtedly one of BioWare's flagship franchises, and considered by many to be one of the stronger fantasy RPG settings ever created. *Dragon Age: Inquisition* is the third instalment of the series and takes place after the events of both *Origins* and *Dragon Age 2* – you can even import your old save files, carrying over choices you made in the two previous games.

Alongside *DA:I,* BioWare made the *Dragon Age Keep,* a website where you can import *DA:O* and *DA2* save games to use in *DA:I.* Even if you lost the save files or never played the previous game, you can use the website to craft a custom world state.

Players will see all of the familiar races and classes available to choose from on loading up the game but, unlike in *Origins,* their choice will have no impact upon the opening sequence. Upon finishing the introduction, players will learn that they are the leader of a newly-formed faction: the Inquisition. Your main goal will be to seek out breaches (portals that allow demons to enter the world) and close them, using a magic that only your hero possesses.

The faction aspect is not new to the series, as the Grey Wardens played an integral role in *DA:O*. The series has a history of highlighting politics and its impact on the world around you; however, none had previously made it such an integral part of the game. One of the more satisfying aspects of *DA:I* is growing the newly formed Inquisition faction from a small band into a true power in the land of Thedas.



Combat can be played in the real-time action RPG-like mode of *DA2*, or in the tactical top-down RTwP mode of *DA:O*

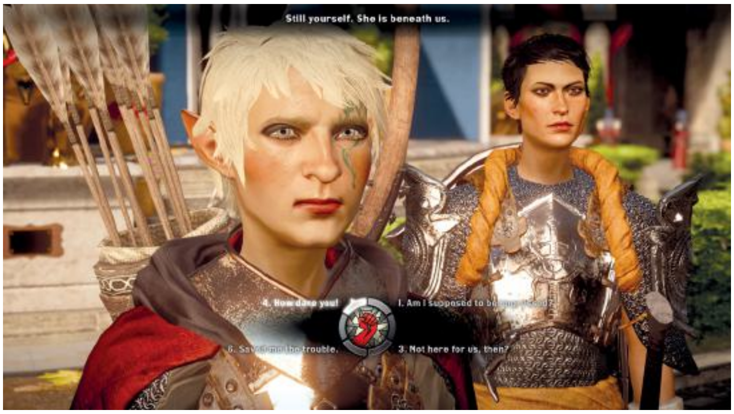
By exploring the massive zones and completing the countless hours of side-quests, you are rewarded with both influence and power, tools vital to the expansion of the Inquisition and unlocking new zones. As your Inquisition grows in reputation, choices that you make will affect how the story unfolds and how those around the world see you. Do you execute an enemy or simply banish him to join the Grey Wardens? These choices have an impact on how the story plays out and provide significant replay value. Your choices, regardless of how trivial they may seem, matter.

Graphically, *DA:I* takes the series to another level. The game uses EA's Frostbite Engine and, despite a rocky development process and still having to support last-gen hardware, it sports vastly improved player models, environment, combat and skill effects. Some of the most satisfying moments in the game will be taking a break from slaying bandits and fade the demons to simply appreciate the environment around you.

And there's certainly no shortage of environments to marvel at. *Inquisition* dwarfs both its predecessors – it's divided into multiple zones, with a single zone being nearly as large as all of *DA:O*. Each zone is unique and beautiful in its own right, and contains enough secrets, loot and battles to keep even the most experienced *DA* veterans busy for days.

The loot system in *Inquisition* is quite traditional, but where the game stands out from previous instalments is in its greatly improved crafting system. This makes rewards from questing and looting more meaningful and provides depth that lasts throughout the entire game. No more will you have to wear the same armour for half of the game, as it is easy to both find and fashion upgrades. These upgrades provide noticeable differences in combat, allowing you to feel the growth in power of your character as you progress.

> *"Inquisition* was bigger than it needed to be. It had everything but the kitchen sink in it, to the point that we went too far ... I think that having to deal with *Dragon Age 2* and the negative feedback we got on some parts of that was driving the team to want to put everything in and try to address every little problem or perceived problem."
>
> *– Cameron Lee,*
> Dragon Age: Inquisition*'s producer*



The Dialogue Wheel was expanded, displaying new emotions and choices that require money, or specific perks or classes/races

The combat in *DA:I* will prove satisfying for both those who enjoyed the more tactical approach of *DA:O* and those who preferred the more action-oriented *DA2*. Encounters are normally played in real time, with the ability to perform basic attacks, cast spells, use abilities and switch in real time between your party members. At any point, combat may be frozen and a tactical overhead view will allow you to plan the attacks of each of your four party members. Once you are satisfied with your tactics you may return the game to live action. Both modes are extremely fluid and transitioning between them is seamless.

Joining you on your quest will be a mix of familiar faces from previous games and a stout cast of new companions. As with all *Dragon Age* games (and BioWare games in general), the voice acting is top-notch and creates some very unique and memorable characters. Dorian and Cole in particular stand out and provide some of the best storylines and dialogue throughout the journey.

Fans of the series will also be excited to see guest appearances from some of the more popular characters in the previous two instalments.

Yet, despite several familiar faces from previous games, *Inquisition*'s story is a far cry from that of the beloved first instalment, *Dragon Age: Origins*.

While it has its moments, it fails to properly create a sense of urgency or really allow you to become properly invested in what is at stake. Compelling individual character storylines are present, but they don't seamlessly fit into the grand scheme.

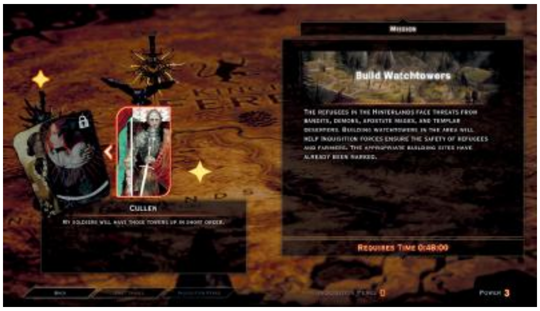
The same could be said about some side-quests, which can feel like busy-work. There are hundreds of them, which can unlock mounts and powerful items, and help grow your forces. Some players might find them repetitive and skip them, but others will be able to ignore the main story for hours upon hours of play.

The game had several DLCs and three expansions – *Jaws of Hakkon*, *The Descent* and *Trespasser*. The first two simply add new areas with more content, but the last greatly expands the game's ending and story.

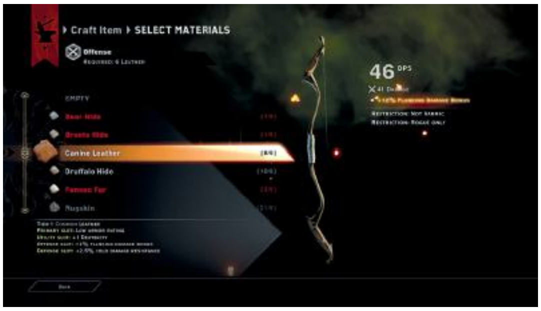
DA:I is also the first *Dragon Age* game that features a multiplayer mode, in which you and four other players battle your way through increasingly difficult levels of randomly-generated monsters.

Ultimately, *Dragon Age: Inquisition* builds upon the strong foundation of the series and other BioWare RPGs by adding tons of content and replayability. While it may lack the charm and polish of *DA:O* and some of BioWare's early RPGs, it's still a game you can easily sink over a hundred hours into on your first playthrough – and still be eager for more. **CHR**

***DA:I*'s first expansion, *Jaws of Hakkon*, was released for all platforms. The following ones, however, abandoned the older consoles and were exclusive to PC, Xbox One and PS4.**

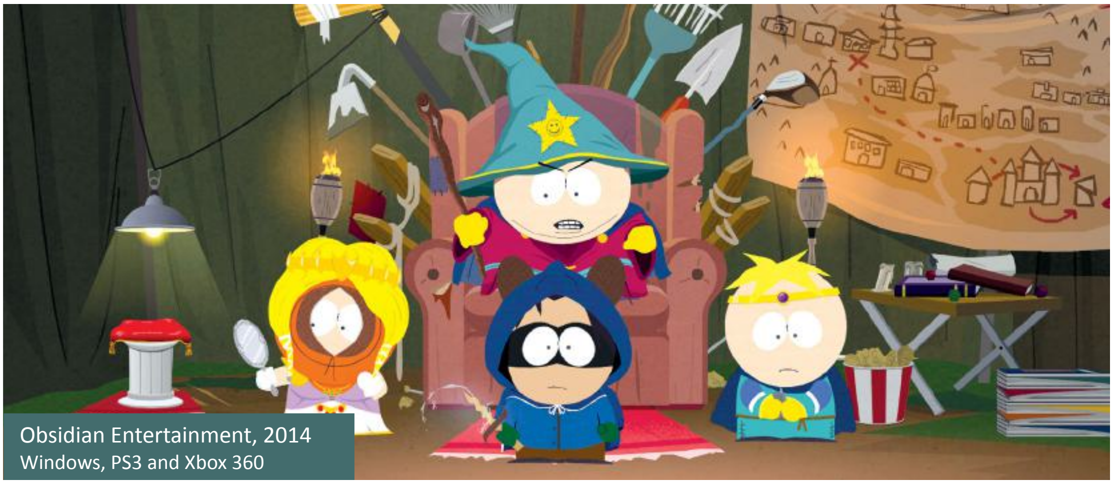


The War Table allows you to manage your Inquisition, dispatching advisors and doing missions to earn resources



Crafting expands the series' usually limited loot, featuring multiple materials that imbue items with unique bonuses

South Park:
The Stick of Truth

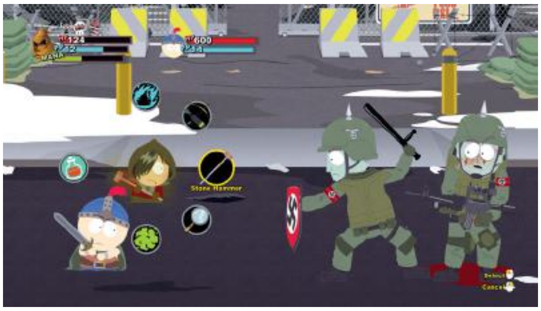


Obsidian Entertainment, 2014
Windows, PS3 and Xbox 360

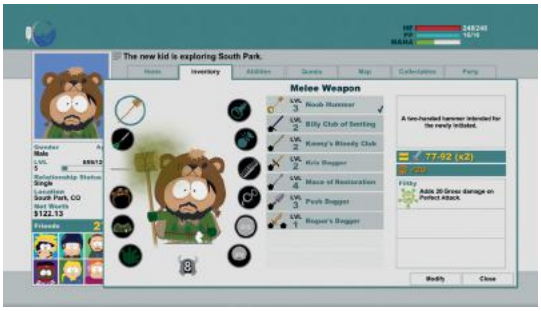
The first time I saw *The Stick of Truth*, it felt like I was watching the TV show – maybe something like their famous "Make Love, Not Warcraft" episode. This was partially because the visuals of the game perfectly match those of the show, and all the voices and even some of the writing are done by the show's creators, Matt Stone and Trey Parker.

The Stick of Truth **was censored in Germany for its Nazi imagery, and in some other countries due to scenes involving anal probing by aliens**

However, what truly makes *The Stick of Truth* feel like the show is its pacing. RPGs have a tendency to be long, overwritten and full of pointless filler (something Obsidian often struggles with), but here you have a game that is short, concise and fast-paced – just like the TV show. It's a comedy about kids playing an RPG, and all its rules, stats, battles and other genre tropes are used as tools to deliver jokes.



You control your kid and a friend during combat, using melee attacks, ranged weapons, skills, items, summons and farts to beat your foes



The menus are displayed as if they were a Facebook page, with characters adding you as a friend and commenting on recent events

You play as "the new kid", who just moved into South Park and joins Cartman and his friends in playing an elaborate RPG-like game. The entire town is available for you to explore, and it's a fan-service overload, packed with jokes and references to the show.

As the kid explores and completes quests, he'll make friends (who can join him in battle) and find new equipment, allowing you to customise his look and skills. Each area is short and only has a few battles, most of which can be skipped by using the environment – such as farting on a candle to burn nearby enemies. This helps keep the pace tight and avoid repetition.

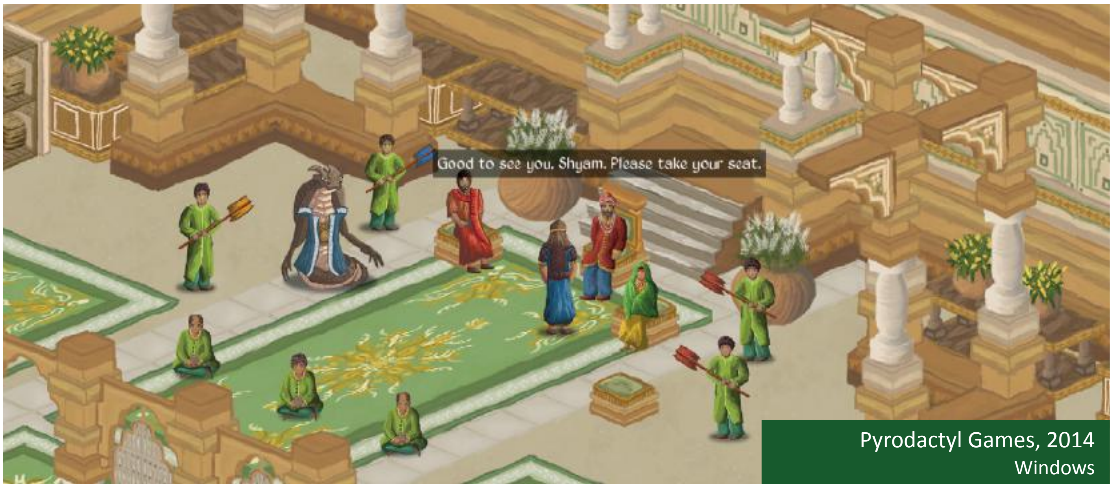
Combat is turn-based and very similar to that in the *Paper Mario* series, in which you can empower attacks and block with timed button presses. It's easy and unbalanced, but its goal is not to challenge players – it's there to deliver jokes, allowing you to listen to funny taunts, use farts as magic, dodge giant testicles mid-battle and summon Jesus to kill your foes.

Lasting only about 10–15 hours, the game ends before becoming repetitive or running out of ideas – something I wish more RPGs would emulate.

The sequel, *South Park: The Fractured but Whole* (2017), ditched Obsidian in favour of Ubisoft's internal studio, which brought several changes. Now the kids are playing as superheroes and parodying Marvel and DC movies, but the game lacks the novelty and tight pacing of its predecessor. It adds a more complex character system and grid-based tactical battles, which pleased some players, yet feels somewhat misguided. Spending a lot of time fighting tactical battles in a comedy game is a bit like playing *Doom* for the story.

Nevertheless, both titles are a joy for *South Park* fans and a fun ride even for those who aren't familiar with the TV show. There are deeper RPGs out there, but very few that are funnier. **FE**

Unrest



Pyrodactyl Games, 2014
Windows

It's impossible to overstate how important crowd-funding was to video games in the 2010s. Not only did it revive genres and gameplay styles long declared dead, it also breathed new life into the industry, funding games no publisher would touch.

Unrest is a perfect example of this: it's a short indie game about five characters in a fantasy version of ancient India, struggling with a rigid caste system and a harsh world in which there are no easy answers.

The city of Bhimra is suffering from a devastating drought, with people in the slums starving to death while merchants, priests and nobles shelter inside the city walls. The game begins as the King announces a desperate deal with the powerful Naga Empire.

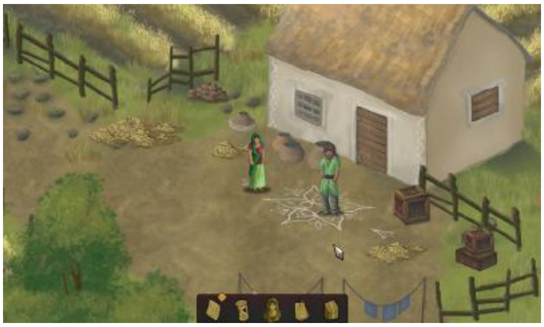
The story unveils through eight short chapters, exploring the city from different angles: a princess locked in the palace, a Naga diplomat arriving to negotiate, a farmer's daughter entering an arranged marriage, a weary priest trying to protect his family, and a mercenary captain deciding how to act amidst all this chaos. While the game lasts only 3–4 hours, it's skilfully written, with each chapter successfully and concisely presenting a character's struggles.

However, don't expect to slay hordes of monsters and become the city's hero – *Unrest*'s characters are mostly powerless, chained by their roles in society. They are forced to compromise and make decisions with no clear, right answer, and they may never know the outcome. There's no morality bar, no reputation, ending slides or other RPG tropes associated with choices and consequences. Yet, choices matter deeply, not as paths to different rewards, but as tools for player expression. You won't radically change the world, but you can make things a bit better or a bit worse. There are multiple endings and even ways for characters to die, which gets embraced as part of the story.

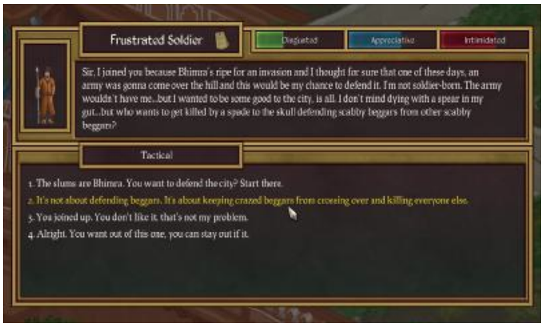
Some will say that *Unrest* isn't a "real" RPG, since it doesn't have stats, skills, XP or failure states. Truly, the entire game boils down to just walking around and talking – combat is extremely rare (and very crude). Even items are mostly just for world-building, such as religious trinkets or mouldy pieces of bread.

As such, *Unrest* isn't a game for everyone – as Richard Garriott once said, role-playing games and RPGs have become different things over time. But that's precisely one of the perks of crowd-funding: a small team with a minuscule budget can ignore genre conventions to deliver a charming game with tough questions, where the hardships of life can't be solved with binary morality or typical RPG heroism. **FE**

***Unrest* was crowdfunded in 2013 on Kickstarter, raising about $36,000. Their original goal was $3,000.**



Unrest's tiny budget is obvious in the game's simple visuals, repetitive music and very basic gameplay – its selling point is the solid writing

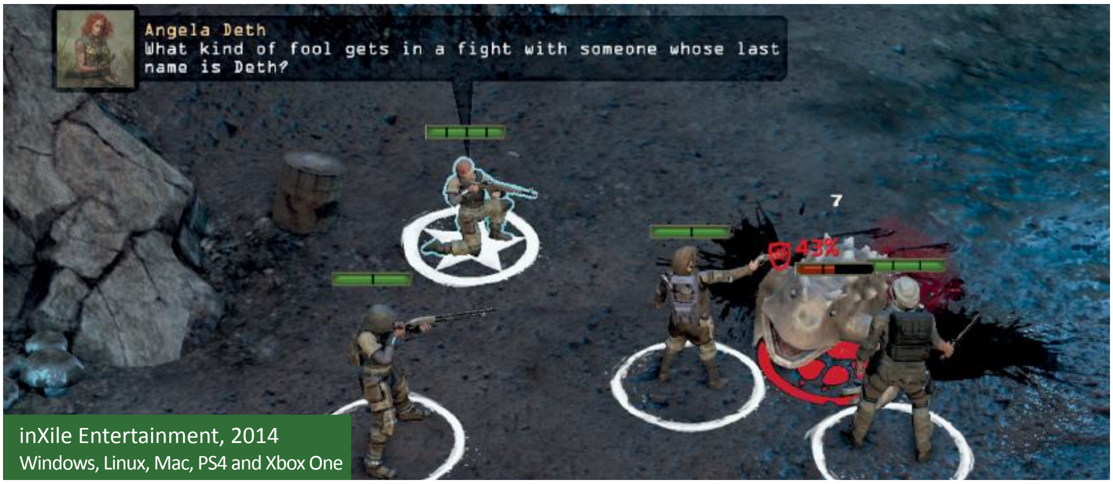


Sir, I joined you because Bhimra's ripe for an invasion and I thought for sure that one of these days, an army was gonna come over the hill and this would be my chance to defend it. I'm not soldier-born. The army wouldn't have me...but I wanted to be some good to the city, is all. I don't mind dying with a spear in my gut...but who wants to get killed by a spade to the skull defending scabby beggars from other scabby beggars?

1. The slums are Bhimra. You want to defend the city? Start there.
2. It's not about defending beggars. It's about keeping crazed beggars from crossing over and killing everyone else.
3. You joined up. You don't like it, that's not my problem.
4. Alright. You want out of this one, you can stay out if it.

The game tracks people's opinions of you and your character's traits, but these have no gameplay impact, serving only as reflection of your choices

Wasteland 2



Angela Deth
What kind of fool gets in a fight with someone whose last name is Deth?

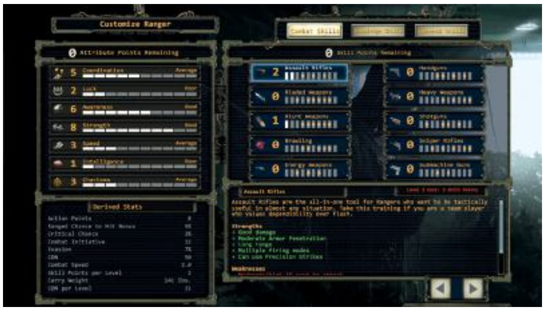
inXile Entertainment, 2014
Windows, Linux, Mac, PS4 and Xbox One

In the innocent days of 2012, game designer Tim Schafer (*Full Throttle, Psychonauts, Grim Fandango*), using a little-known platform called Kickstarter, went directly to the public to raise funds for the development of a new computer game. His hope was to avoid the otherwise necessary evil of publisher oversight, freeing the developers to work their creative magic entirely by their own rules. Schafer asked for $400,000 but ended up raising $3.3 million, changing crowdfunding forever.

***Wasteland 2's* Kickstarter campaign launched in March 2012, raising $2,933,252 plus PayPal donations.**

On the heels of this accomplishment, producer Brian Fargo saw his opportunity to do the same thing, and revive a project that had been burning in the back of his mind for nigh-on twenty years. *Wasteland 2* was to be both (officially) a sequel to Fargo's 1988 top-down party RPG, *Wasteland*, and (unofficially) a spiritual successor to *Fallout* and *Fallout 2*, the isometric single-character classics. Fargo's proposed team was filled with heavyweights: Alan Pavlish, Jason Anderson, Ken St. Andre, Michael Stackpole, Liz Danforth and others, many of whom had worked on the original games.

More importantly, Fargo's company, inXile Entertainment, promised to revive a style of game that had lain comatose for all that time. They raised over $3,000,000 – including an important $30 of my own.



Character creation mixes stats, skills and perks to offer a lot of possibilities, but not all of them are viable: some stats, like Strength, aren't very useful, and there are stat thresholds which punish some builds

I grew up on *Wasteland*, and the announcement of this project represented a chance to relive an uncritical childhood joy. Ultimately, even filtered through the cynicism of adulthood, my gamble paid off.

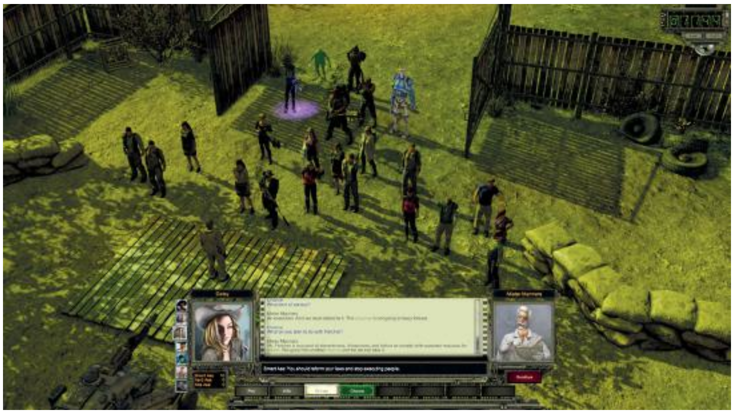
So what did we get, exactly? *Wasteland 2* is the story of a quartet of newly-minted Desert Rangers, post-apocalypse cops somewhat in the vein of *Mad Max*, with a more cowboy feel.

Who are these Rangers? Wonderfully, that is up to you. Sincerely helpful protectors of the innocent? Disinterested mercenaries doing the bare minimum? Hardened killers who solve every problem by butchering both perps and victims? Professional soldiers in leather and fatigues? Drunken lunatics in gorilla suits and lingerie? There's even a path for players who don't want to be Desert Rangers at all. Blow off missions, attack the innocent, steal, raid, and kill your boss; you will find that there are scripted consequences there too, with a full alternate ending.

Wasteland 2 hangs its hat on substantial choices, and it delivers. Side with a paramilitary organisation intent on bringing order to a chaotic trade route, and you'll be forced to battle the cult that currently controls the region; or you can side with the cult and do a completely different set of missions, or play the two against each other, or fight them all. These decisions may have resounding effects on your game.

Part of *W2*'s deep commitment to player agency includes the ability to fail. Try to save a drowning boy and you might end up killing him. Investigate slaver activity in an attempt to rescue an innocent girl and your actions might lead to her suicide. Resounding success in one mission might mean another becomes unsolvable or irrelevant, imbuing your choices with true consequences. Tanking a mission never means game over, unless your squad is wiped out entirely.

> *"One of the things we liked about Wasteland 2 is there were multiple endings along the way. You didn't have to play the game all the way to the 'normal' ending to win. Because what's a 'win'? It's a narrative, right? You're telling your own story. So we redefined what winning means."*
>
> *– Chris Keenan,* Wasteland 2*'s director*



Dialogues allow for several kinds of choice and skill check, but also feature a keyword system – a call-back to the first *Wasteland* that feels oddly out of place

"Failing forward" is a foreign concept to many gamers but, for those of us who appreciate the concept, the freedom on offer here is rare and precious.

Missions range in tone from deadly serious to outright goofy. You'll battle an organised gang of murderers by assaulting their fortress in an hours-long campaign of blood and horror, then save a man from being executed for the crime of dandruff by donating Earth's last surviving bottle of medicated shampoo.

W2's areas are connected by a sprawling world map, replete with lethal radiation, random encounters, and secrets. Once inside an area, the game assumes a ¾ perspective reminiscent of *Fallout*'s, now fully rotating in 3D. Combat is turn-based with light tactical elements, focusing more on statistics than strategy. The addition of "called shots" in the 2015 *Director's Cut* edition gave combat more depth than simple hit point attrition: one Ranger might shoot an enemy's arm to spoil his aim, buying the others time to kill him.

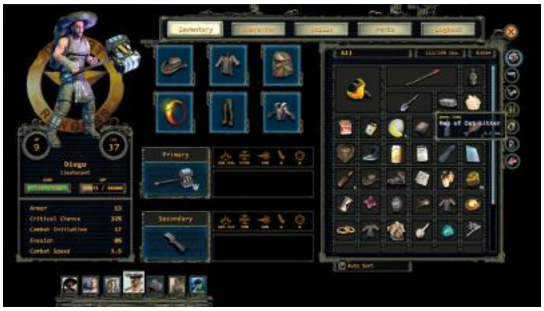
Character-building includes not only stats and skills, but Perks, à la *Fallout*, as well. My team featured a Bloodthirsty Opportunist who received a bonus when attacking wounded targets and scored extra Action Points for finishing off enemies, and a Thick-Skinned, Hardened, Weathered Melee Slayer who moved with the grace of a buffalo but was virtually indestructible.

Which brings us to the issue of balance. It isn't great – by the end of the game on "Ranger" (Hard) difficulty, all my characters had a 100% chance of hitting every shot, and an outlandishly steep gear curve meant my armour shrugged off any attacks short of nukes. I still had fun, but for a substantial challenge, "Supreme Jerk" difficulty is recommended.

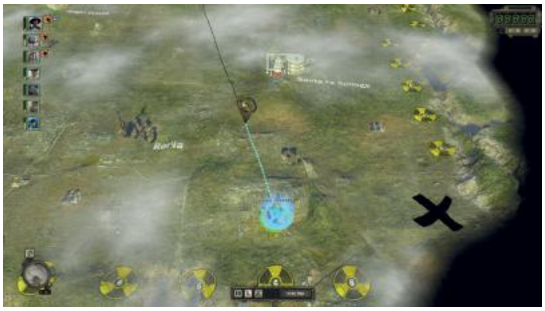
The game is packed with content; a typical playthrough may take 40 or 50 hours. This is a double-edged sword in that it makes *W2* hard to replay, which in turn makes it difficult to appreciate the choices you're making and the consequences unfolding around you. Who knows how things might have turned out at the end if I'd made different decisions at the beginning? Is it worth another 40 hours to find out?

Still, not seeing all the outcomes made my choices feel more my own. One doesn't read a CYOA book from cover to cover; that misses the point. Meeting friends, making enemies, deciding who lived and who died – my journey was not quite like any other. I uncovered a lie and spread the truth, and a whole region descended into violent chaos. I shot an innocent man and let a guilty one go free, and covered up my crimes for what I thought was the greater good. Did I do right? Could I have done better? Maybe some day I'll tell the story again in a different way and see what happens. **RJS**

In 2015, Brian Fargo joined with other investors to create Fig, a crowd-funding platform where backers would also get part of the profit from projects they backed. InXile used the platform to fund *Wasteland 3* in 2016, raising $3,121,716.

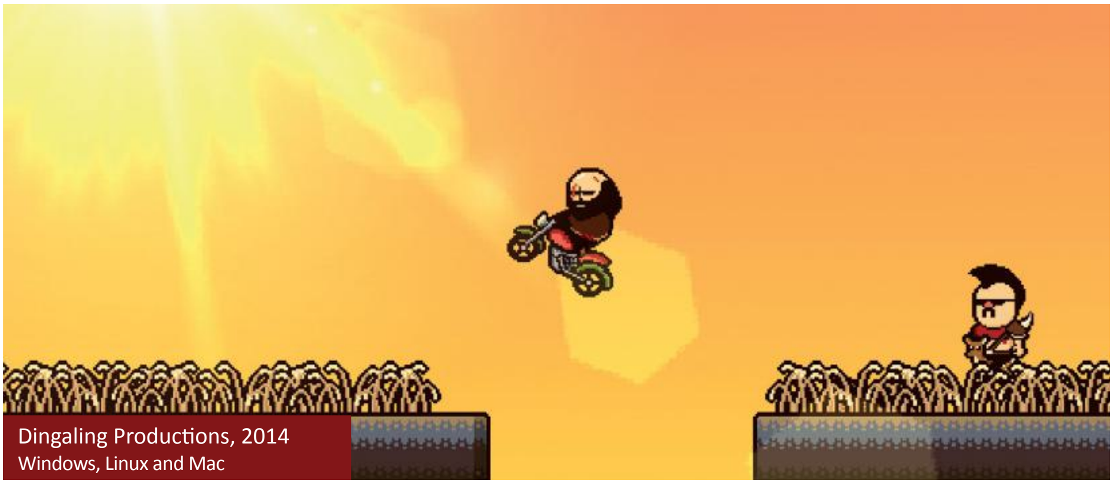


The UI features some poor design choices, but also quality-of-life improvements such as automatically distributing loot



You explore the wasteland via a 3D overworld map, dealing with radiation, random encounters and limited water supplies

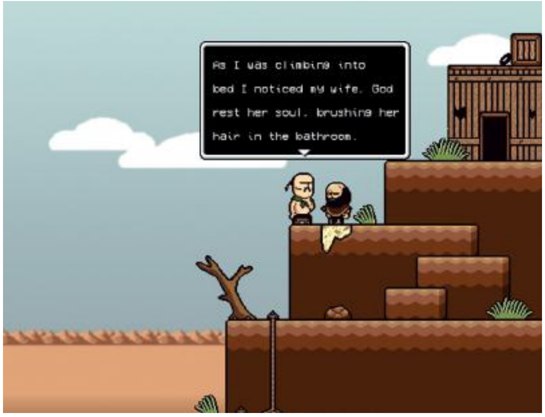
LISA: The Painful



Dingaling Productions, 2014
Windows, Linux and Mac

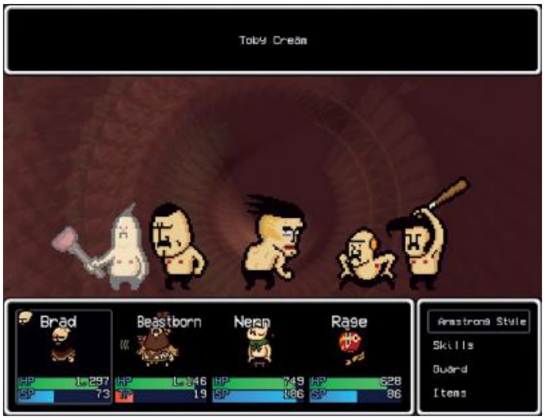
The *LISA* series is a one-man vision – the peculiar creation of indie developer Austin Jorgenson, inspired by the traumas of a former relationship. Lisa was a little girl who dreamed of escaping her abusive father. This is the entire narrative of the first game, *LISA: The First* (2012), which was inspired by *Yume Nikki.* You explore the dream world of little Lisa, progressing by solving simple puzzles.

***LISA: The Painful* was crowdfunded on Kickstarter. The campaign launched in November 2013 and raised $16,492.**



As I was climbing into bed I noticed my wife. God rest her soul. brushing her hair in the bathroom.

LISA's visuals, story, combat and soundtrack all work tightly to create a unique world; as the game was made in *RPG Maker*, fans have created several sequels to further explore this world



There are over 30 men you can recruit to support you in combat, each with a unique moveset; how many will make it alive to the end is often up to the player

It is a small game that serves only to hammer home one theme, how the abuse Lisa suffered has poisoned everything, and even in her most secret dreams there is no escaping what her father has done to her.

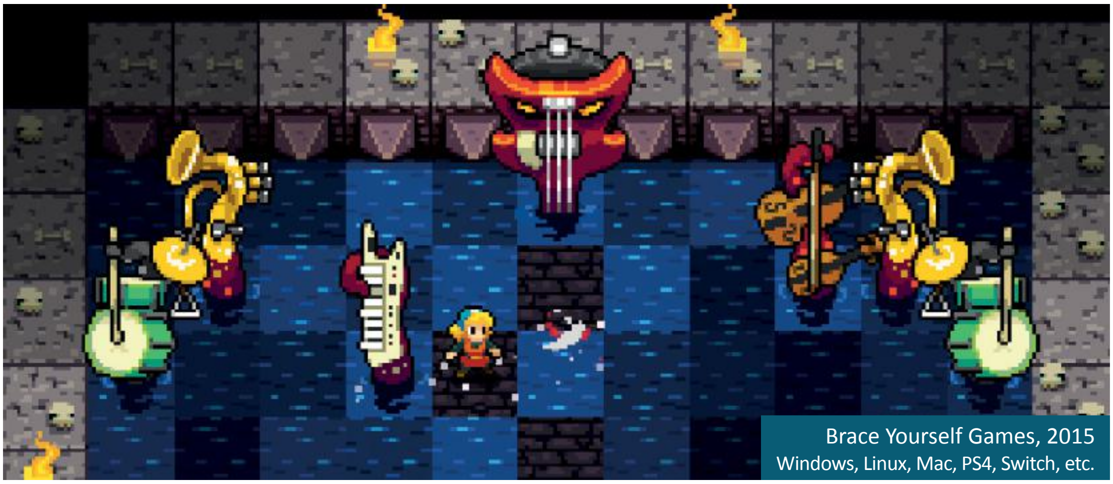
The sequel and main game, *LISA: The Painful*, opens to a main menu screen with little Lisa hanging from a noose in the background. This is the start of the story of her brother Brad, a broken and miserable man whose life has been defined by the scars of childhood abuse and by guilt over failing to protect his sister.

Reflective of the main character's mind, the world is now a post-apocalyptic wasteland. In a long-ago mysterious event, all the women disappeared, and with them went all meaning and hope. Left behind is a hazy desert landscape in which whacked-out and frustrated middle-aged men spend their dying days growing bald, fighting and losing their minds. When a female baby miraculously appears, a hopeless Brad picks up his old karate skills to finally try to create something good, by protecting her against the thirsty men of the wastes.

For a game that has a lot of ideas floating around, the storytelling in *Painful* is very efficient. Dramatic scenes are quick and to the point, and a lot of thought has gone into tying the narrative to the gameplay. The JRPG-style turn-based combat lets you experience what kind of man Brad is and what the world demands of you to get him through his quest. You are expected to use every card the game hands to you, and to make do when it takes others away. And take them away it will, as the arbitrary nature of punishment and suffering is a part of the game's darkly comedic tone, and the player is not spared the joke.

In the final chapter, *LISA: The Joyful* (2015) you get to play as that last female child in this wasteland of all men, and see what example Brad set with his actions, what scars he passed on. A DLC, it is mostly a qualitative continuation for players who simply want more. **TGT**

Crypt of the NecroDancer



Brace Yourself Games, 2015
Windows, Linux, Mac, PS4, Switch, etc.

Crypt of the NecroDancer is a colourful Roguelike with a very unique twist: the movement and attacks of every enemy in the game are performed to the beat of the music.

The main protagonist is Cadence, a feisty lass, who recklessly decides to enter the forbidden crypt in search of her long-lost father. She promptly dies … and gets resurrected by the ominous NecroDancer, albeit with a dark musical curse. Her heart, and thus her life-force, are now linked to the crypt's rhythm. But there's still hope: if she manages to turn this curse into a boon, reach the lowest floor of the crypt and defeat the NecroDancer, she may yet win her freedom.

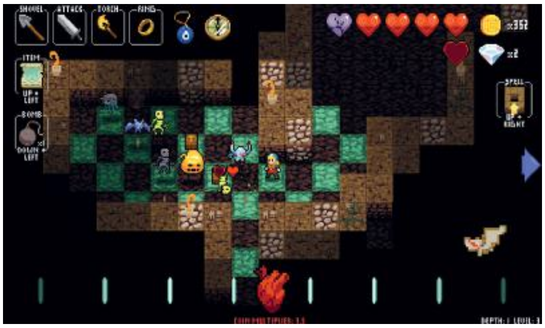
The gameplay loop is easy to grasp: on each level you need to find a mini-boss, defeat it and reach the stairs to the lower floor, preferably before the music stops. It is recommended that you move and attack to the rhythm of the music, as apart from the effect of changing the ground to a flashing disco floor, it increases your combo meter. This in turn gives you more gold from enemies and strengthens certain weapons. Every fourth floor you enter is occupied by a music-themed boss posing a difficult challenge, e.g. reaper-like Death Metal with sped-up music. The true challenge of the game, though, is in learning the enemy patterns and utilising them to your advantage.

Every run that you perform brings you one step closer to victory, not only due to the fact that your skills are improving, but also because in between the runs you get to unlock new weapons, spells and items for use in the future. By reaching specific milestones and goals, it is also possible to unlock new characters to play, each with an additional quirk, such as the Monk who dies instantly upon entering a tile with gold. In fact, to experience the full story you will have to finish the game thrice, with increasingly difficult characters.

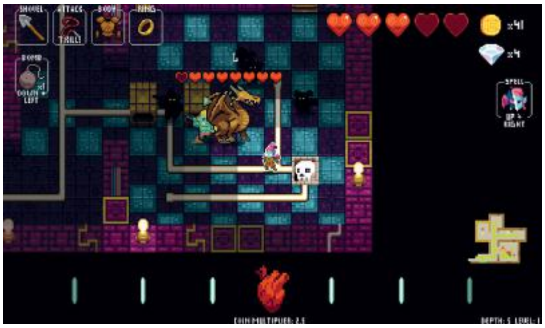
The game wouldn't be as successful if not for the memorable soundtrack composed by Danny Baranowsky. It has been gradually updated with music genres ranging from EDM through synthwave to metal, the remixed versions tied to certain characters.

All in all, *Crypt of the NecroDancer* is a lightweight and charming, but also a very addictive experience. You'll grind your teeth when you make a mistake that leads to your untimely death, but trust me: you will come back for more every single time. And sure, it is not a full-fledged RPG, but it was never supposed to be. Sometimes between slaying another dragon and saving another kingdom it is good just to disco a bit, don't you think? **RED**

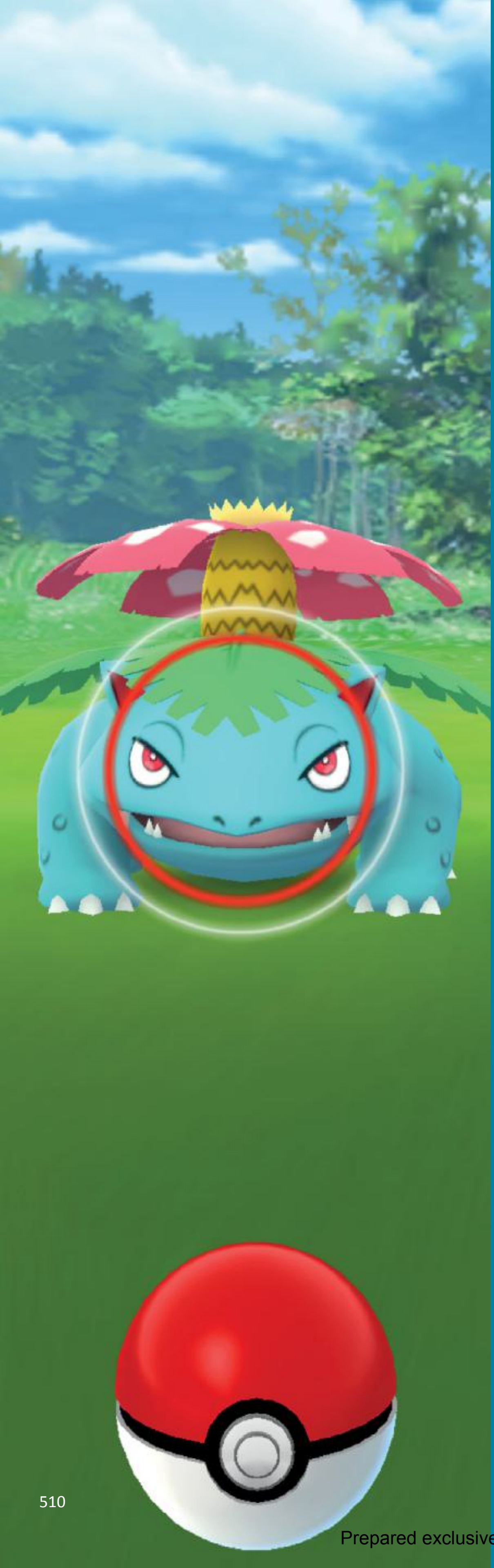
***Cadence of Hyrule* is a 2019 spin-off that combines *NecroDancer* with the *Legend of Zelda* series. It's exclusive to the Switch, but there are mods for *NecroDancer* on PC that offer similar mashups, with series like *Mega Man* and *Undertale*.**



Inside the dungeons you'll find weapons that change your attack range, as well as armour, bombs, keys, shovels, spells and other consumables



NecroDancer has ten characters with different playstyles, including the bard, who doesn't need to follow a beat; the *Amplified* DLC adds four more characters and several new game modes



2015-2019: The small screens become the big earners

Never before were so many games made, and never before did so many people play them – including those who had never had access before.

Steam went from 379 new games released in 2012 to 8,033 in 2019. The store abandoned any attempt at curation, recognising that they couldn't predict which games would be popular and offering better search tools instead. While competition was tighter, developers also had new options, with Itch.io and Epic Games Store providing alternatives to Steam.

Kickstarter fever had slowed down but crowd-funding was still a popular tool, and websites like Patreon allowed fans to directly fund all sorts of projects, from *Minecraft* shaders to adult-only games like *Summertime Saga*. Big mainstream hits still existed, but now every niche also had games made for it, from narrative-oriented "walking sims" to '90s-inspired "boomer-shooters" and hardcore, old-school RPGs.

Technology had also made them more accessible – while enthusiasts now aimed for 4K graphics and ray-tracing, the new integrated graphics chips meant that even a cheap laptop with no GPU could run popular games like *League of Legends*, *DOTA 2*, *Counter-Strike: GO* and *GTA V*.

Still, nothing was as successful as mobile games. Big hits like *Clash of Clans* and *Candy Crush Saga* were joined by new games with more diverse types of experience – from *Fortnite*, *Lineage M, Asphalt* and *Pokémon GO* to indie hits like *Among Us* and *Monument Valley* – destroying the image of "casual games for mums" and captivating a new, younger audience.

Mostly free-to-play and accessible to anyone with a smartphone, mobile games also found a new audience in the global south, reaching millions of players in Latin America, Africa, India and Southeast Asia. This is how games like Garena's *Free Fire* reach numbers like 150 million daily players – building communities in historically-ignored regions.

Meanwhile, the console market had to adapt – video game audiences continued to grow exponentially, but the 8th console generation struggled to reach this new audience and enter emerging markets like India and China. Ideas like motion sensors failed to make an impact, so a "half-gen" was released with the PS4 Pro and the Xbox One X, targeting enthusiasts who wanted 4K graphics and smoother framerates. Microsoft eventually ended the exclusivity of their console titles, releasing them on PC as well, focusing heavily on their Xbox Game Pass subscription service.

According to Newzoo, mobile games had a 70 billion USD revenue in 2018, surpassing for the first time both the PC and the console markets combined. With cross-platform titles as distinct as *Fortnite*, *Among Us* and *Genshin Impact* delivering the same experience across mobile, PC and consoles, the very way in which we think about platforms is changing.

Trends:

Roblox: Released on PCs in 2006, *Roblox* began as a free-to-play online game in which kids could play with something very like a virtual *LEGO* play-set, building structures for other players to explore or creating simple physics-based games. Constantly expanded and upgraded, it grew exponentially after being ported to iOS in 2012 and Android in 2014, reaching over 100M players in 2019 – mostly children under 16 years old. As of 2021 it hosts over 50 million games, but suffers from accusations of exploiting the young players who make those games.

The most popular *Roblox* games, such as *Jailbreak, Piggy* and *Adopt Me!,* have over a billion plays each

Subscription-based gaming: Following in the footsteps of services like Netflix and Spotify, game companies began to offer subscription services that gave access to a large catalogue of games. EA Play began in 2014, but the model gained popularity with the Xbox Game Pass in 2017, as Microsoft made big titles like *Sea of Thieves* available on launch day. The move brought in a much larger player base, which was also more willing to spend with micro-transactions. The format was soon followed by others, such as 2019's Apple Arcade.

The Xbox Game Pass has over 18 million subscribers as of 2021, offering a rotating library of over 400 games

Loot boxes: Loot boxes have many predecessors, from trading card games and Japan's "gachapon" machines to China's *ZT Online* (征途, 2006) MMO. They slowly grew, from *Team Fortress 2*'s crates to *FIFA Ultimate Team*'s player packs, reaching a breaking point in the mid-2010s. Players protested their inclusion in single-player games like 2017's *Middle-earth: Shadow of War,* while parents and politicians began seeing them as gambling for children and imposing regulations. Facing severe backlash, many games have abandoned the concept.

Overwatch still has loot boxes, but had to make them unavailable in countries like Belgium and China due to new laws

The **Oculus Rift** is released. Kickstarted in 2012 and purchased by Facebook in 2014, it sparked a new wave of VR sets and games.

The **PlayStation 4 Pro** is released, bringing a mid-generation console upgrade, with improved hardware to deliver 4K output.

The **Xbox One X** is released. Like the PS4 Pro, it's a mid-generation hardware upgrade. The base Xbox One model was also replaced by the Xbox One S.

The **NES Classic** is released. A miniature console with 30 built-in games, it starts a brief wave of miniature retro gaming consoles.

The **Showtime Event** happens inside *Fortnite*, with 10M players watching a virtual concert by EDM artist Marshmello. Even bigger concerts would follow.

2015 | 2016 | 2017 | 2018 | 2019

Pokémon GO is released, reaching over 500 million downloads in less than a year and becoming a global phenomenon. It was one of the biggest topics of 2016, attracting all types of player.

PLAYERUNKNOWN'S
BATTLEGROUNDS

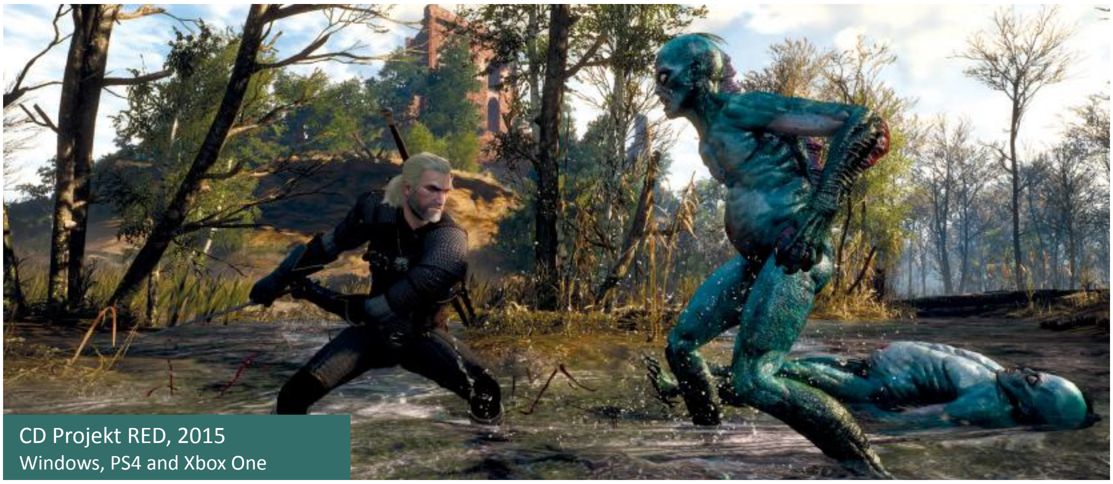
PUBG: Battlegrounds is released, popularising the "battle royale" genre. The original version sold over 70 million copies, while the 2018 mobile port got over 1 billion downloads.

The **Nintendo Switch** is released, a hybrid console that can be hooked onto the TV or played on the go. Highly successful, it has sold over 110 million units, as of August 2022.

Nvidia's GeForce RTX video cards are released, bringing ray-tracing graphics to the mainstream. In 2020, ray-tracing would also appear in AMD's graphics cards and in the next-gen consoles.

The **Epic Games Store** launches. A digital PC game store created to rival Steam, it sets itself apart by charging smaller sales commissions, making exclusivity deals and regularly giving away games.

The Witcher III: Wild Hunt



CD Projekt RED, 2015
Windows, PS4 and Xbox One

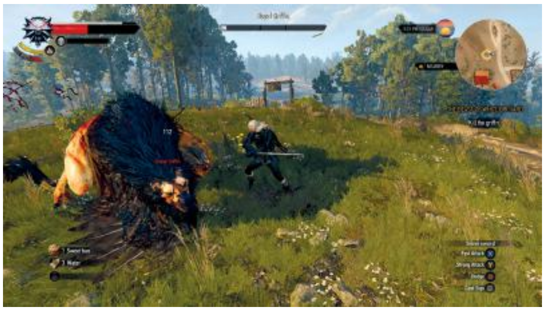
After *Witcher III's* release, CD Projekt created 16 DLCs, including new quests and items, and a New Game+ mode – all freely available for download.

After the success of *The Witcher 2* and the positive buzz about its post-release support, expectations of *The Witcher III* were high. The development team abandoned the linear structure of its predecessor in favour of an open-world approach, yet managed to make it a world worth exploring.

The player revisits the role of the eponymous witcher (monster hunter), Geralt of Rivia. Early on, he learns that his adopted daughter, Ciri, is being pursued by the otherworldly Wild Hunt. The story unfolds through hundreds of main and secondary quests, some of which let you play as Ciri, allowing you to explore the story from her point of view and utilise her latent magical abilities.

The game takes place in three main areas, of generous size. Life is poor, nasty, brutish and short for the inhabitants of rural Velen, where folklore is more than old stories. The bustling city of Novigrad, and its environs, offer all the lures and insidiousness of a more civilised region. Finally, the isles of Skellige are rough, wild places inspired by the Norse sagas.

The combat and movement mechanics have been refurbished since the second game. Geralt is more agile and he can ride horses, use boats and swim to explore the massive game world.



Monster-hunting is an immersive experience: it requires learning about the monsters then preparing yourself, and rewards you with powerful mutagens

He can specialise via three distinct skill trees and equip various items, although, due to lore, swords remain the most effective weapons. The crafting system is useful without being overbearing and weapon degradation is well-balanced. Reflexes remain important in combat, but alchemy can offer an extra boost. Preparing oils and potions before hunting the larger beasts helps the player inhabit the role of witcher, especially in harder difficulties.

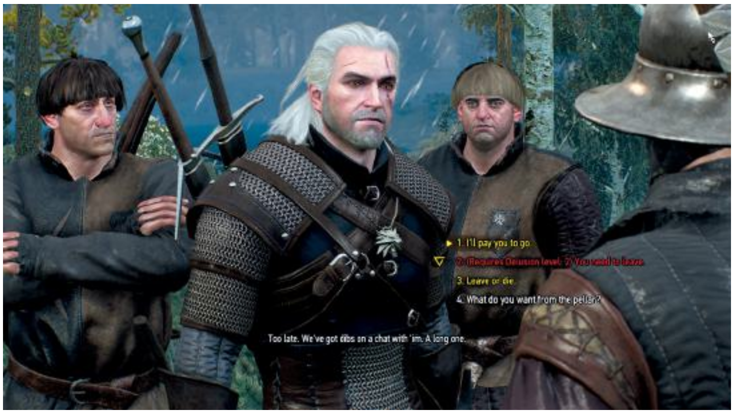
Geralt can also use his witcher abilities to track prey and provide guidance for quest purposes. Said tracking skills also provide an in-world justification for his being uniquely equipped to tackle certain quests. There is horseback combat, horse races, and Gwent, a card game along the lines of *Magic: The Gathering*, which follows a tradition of excellent card games in RPGs, such as Arcomage in *Might and Magic VII* or Triple Triad in *Final Fantasy VIII*.

The Witcher III is technically accomplished and mechanically sound, but its biggest accomplishment is the quality of its quests. Side-quests never feel like they're padding out the game's length, as the game deftly sidesteps those cookie-cutter quests that ask you to gather a number of items or kill a number of enemies.

Secondary quests serve to advance storylines or provide insight into the world; monster hunts are tied to everyday life or to the ecology of an area. Even treasure hunts may lead to interesting locations or uncover personal stories. The sheer length of the game invites shades of déjà vu, but quality remains high throughout the hundreds of hours of play.

The Witcher III is that rarity, a game that lets you memorise lines for a play you are producing, and chastises you for not keeping court protocol. You'll help the bard Dandelion not for a reward, but because he's the kind of friend who tends to get into trouble.

> *"In Poland a different style of [tabletop] RPG was popular – where a story is told and throwing dice is less important. What's important is the psychology of the characters, the way of telling the story and simulating the world. This way of thinking is also visible in The Witcher."*
>
> *– Marcin Blacha,*
> The Witcher III: Wild Hunt*'s*
> *story director*



1. I'll pay you to go.
2. (Requires Delusion level: 2) You need to leave
3. Leave or die.
4. What do you want from the peller?

Too late. We've got dibs on a chat with 'im. A long one.

The Witcher III's dialogue is excellent, having natural writing and great animation; some dialogues also allow you to use your skills, while others enforce a time limit for replying

Taking the time to flesh out characters and Geralt's interactions with them makes the game world feel more concrete and lends weight to the efforts of the player. Combat is an integral part of the game and a pacifist run is not an option. However, this concern for the life of daily folk brings the *Ultima* series to mind, despite the obvious differences.

The incorporation of elements of Polish folklore helps distinguish the game from run-of-the-mill fantasy worlds. Certain sequences evoke an uncanny feeling, draw misplaced anger or make the player feel sympathy for the circumstances that turned someone into the monster they are about to face. Some of the choices have outcomes that are hard to discern, and yet, bad outcomes may not force a reload since they make an impression either way and feel satisfying from a narrative point of view.

Sequences with very mature themes take place in the same game in which you are solemnly tasked with retrieving a favourite pan, and you can opt to have a snowball fight before the climax of the game.

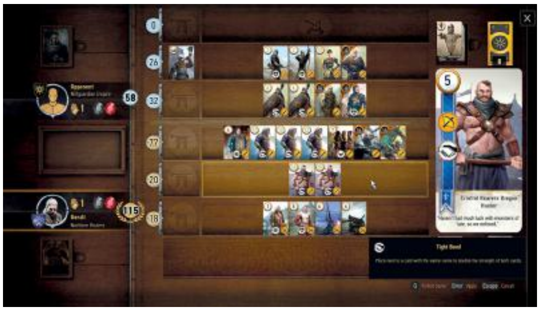
It is not the first game that lets you take a break from questing, but it takes pains to create the texture that makes it worth helping a villager or cutting down a monster. The game also features a fitting denouement for the main game and the expansions.

The first expansion, *Hearts of Stone* (2015), upends the trope of virtually invincible endgame characters by casting Geralt against an immortal and a being that can control time. There are the usual opportunities to fight, track and explore, but at its best moments there's a melancholic, philosophical sheen when exploring the toll of power and the circumstances of the new characters. Bosses have left their kid gloves at home, too.

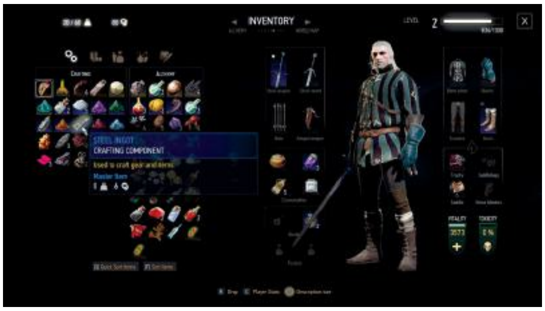
The second expansion, *Blood and Wine* (2016), places Geralt in Toussaint, a new region inspired by France's Provence. This meatier expansion offers a range of quests straight from chansons de geste and epic poems. Geralt can join tournaments, help a cowardly knight fight an ogre, acquire an estate, etc. However, darker undertones soon become apparent. A certain quest with spoons is a best-in-class dark folk tale, and the game's new advancement system keeps things interesting mechanics-wise.

The Witcher III is the culmination of a long journey for CD Projekt. Their skills have increased to match their ambition and many will be saddened that Geralt's saga has come to an end. However, its achievements will remain with us: presenting an interesting world, relevant side-quests and streamlining that does not necessarily sacrifice depth or texture. **AB**

If you want a more realistic experience, try *The Witcher 3 Enhanced Edition* mod. It overhauls the entire game, changing stats, NPCs and combat by removing levels and XP so that the world feels more consistent.

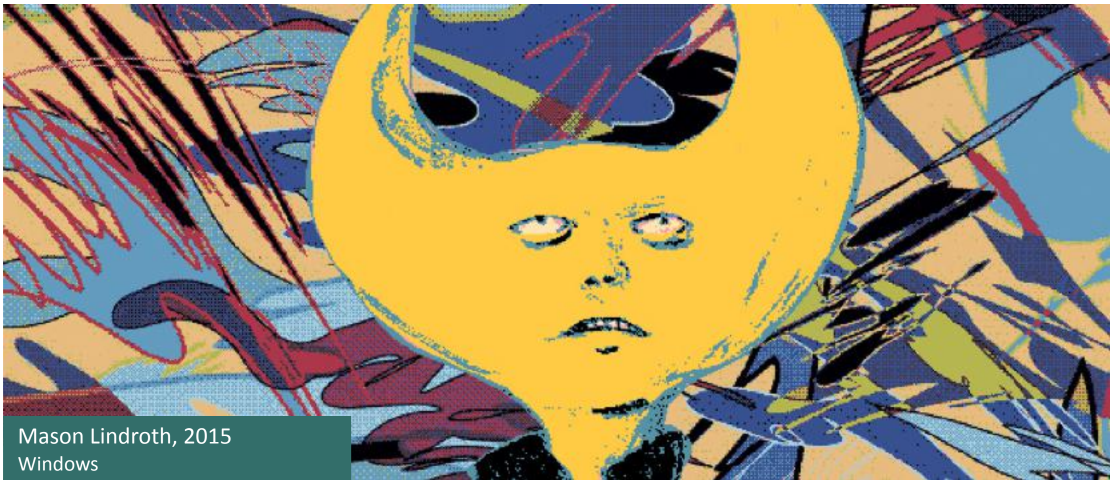


The in-game card game of Gwent became very popular, eventually being released as a stand-alone game in 2016



Despite all its polish, the game has some interface issues, especially in the inventory, which can get very confusing

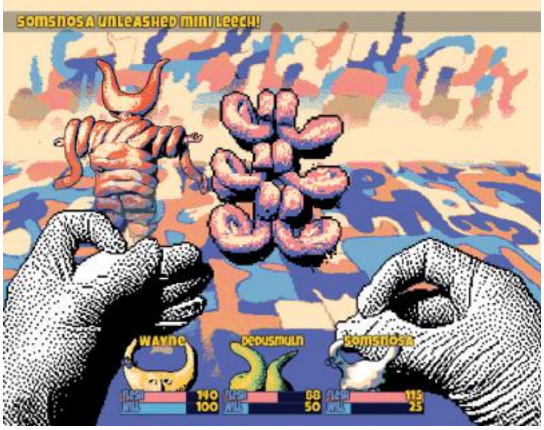
Hylics



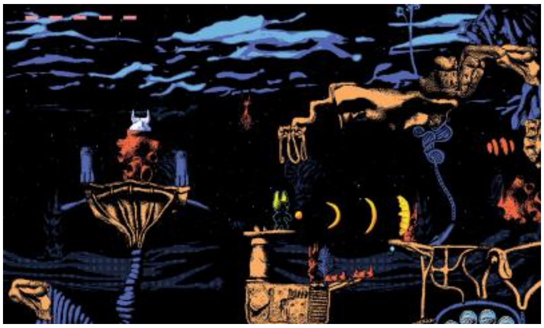
Mason Lindroth, 2015
Windows

The *Hylics* series is an oddity in the world of CRPGs, driven by experimental game designer Mason Lindroth and his unique art style. Like the way *Cuphead* uses a specific style of painstakingly hand-drawn animations, *Hylics* stands out by being made from claymation designs. These can range from the completely baffling, almost confusing enemies that look like fever dream products, to the fairly iconic team of protagonists. Designed in RPG Maker (for the first) and Unity (for the second), both games offer up a bite-sized version of the so-called JRPG formula.

Besides the *Hylics* games, Mason Lindroth also created 11 other small indie games during several Ludum Dare game jams.



Battles in *Hylics* follow a familiar turn-based JRPG formula, but the surreal visuals deliver a unique experience



Hylics 2 makes use of the Unity engine to offer better visuals and more gameplay diversity, such as platforming sections and a first-person dungeon

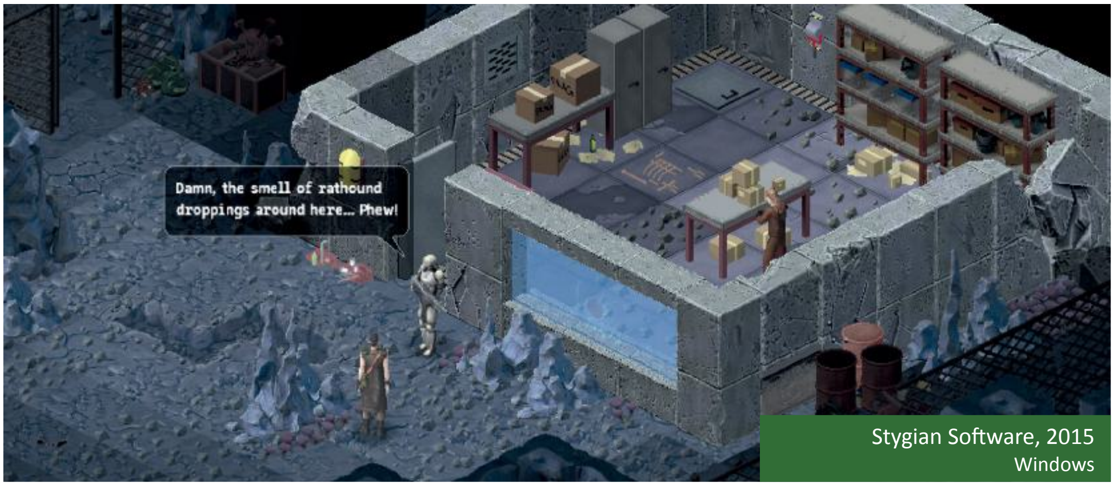
You will start out on a quest alone, explore overworld maps on foot, get into turn-based battles, use items and equip weapons and armour, eventually get an airship to reach new lands and finally have a world-defining battle. You'll be doing this for about three hours in the first game, and around five to seven hours in the second.

The first title is by far the more confusing, as most of the NPC dialogue is generated procedurally and thus means nothing whatsoever, leaving strange red herrings for the player to follow. This extends to some of the game's systems, such as the "burrito" item having two states, frozen and warm – you throw frozen burritos at enemies for damage, and warm them up for a simple healing-potion analogue. Despite the byzantine world-building, the actual game is very simple, and dialogue meant to move the plot along manages to do an excellent job of explaining what you need to do.

Progression is also unique: when you die, you get the chance to turn in "meat" gained from killing enemies, which increases your "flesh" (hit points). Dying is such a normal and expected part of the game that it never feels too difficult, functioning more as a chance to level up. *Hylics* is very meditative in this way, and isn't very interested in being seriously challenging.

Hylics 2 (2020) manages to be a sequel that is both bigger and better. The game features fully 3D environments, presenting itself in interesting and visually appealing ways. Characters are far more lucid this time around; technical shortcomings were fixed; there's more gameplay variety; and the audio is far better. It still manages to feel like one man's jam session, but it works. Like *Hylics*, it does an excellent job of being a relaxing and meditative RPG, with decently challenging combat and some quality tunes. Just relax and enjoy the atmosphere. Breathe in. Breathe out. **DiD**

UnderRail



Stygian Software, 2015
Windows

UnderRail is, quite simply, one of the greatest CRPGs created since the turn of the century. It exemplifies the concept of building living, breathing worlds, popularised once upon a time by the old Origin Systems tag line: "We create worlds."

A post-apocalyptic game clearly reminiscent of the original *Fallout*, *UnderRail* certainly pays homage, but also manages to stand as its own unique game.

The character system is very traditional: there are seven base attributes; over 20 skills divided into Offence, Defence, Subterfuge, Technology (item-crafting), Psi (mental powers) and Social; and loads of feats tailored for various paths and playstyles.

Players can create just about any type of character: a blockhead who wears tailored heavy armour and swings an electrified sledgehammer; a blackguard who sneaks around with a serrated knife; a psi-user who traps enemies behind force walls and pulps their brains with a thought; a commando who uses his customised assault rifle, flashbangs and grenades to blast his way out of everything; a ranger who uses stealth, deadly traps and a silent crossbow to eliminate his enemies one by one; a diplomatic sniper; and many, many more viable combinations.

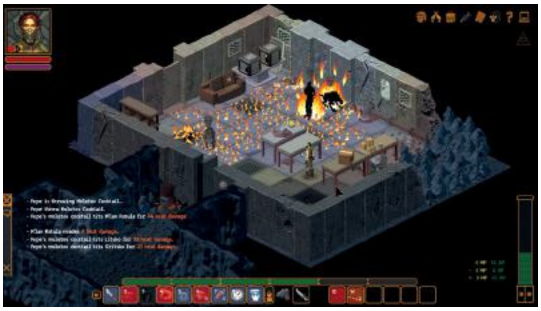
Yet, for me, the exploration aspect of *UnderRail* is its greatest achievement. The rooms are packed with interactions, from the usual boxes and crates to vents you can peek or crawl through, locked doors to pick, ladders to climb and hidden nooks to uncover. The game's level design makes clever use of intricate, interconnected, multi-level rooms and terrain featuring dead ends, one-way passages and so on in such a way that navigating the environment is a challenge by itself.

It's also rewarding, thanks to the Oddity system, which awards XP for exploring and uncovering hidden items – an alternative non-combat experience source.

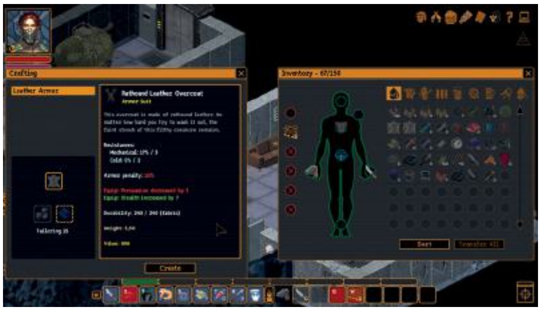
Heavily inspired by *Fallout*, *UnderRail*'s combat is turn-based, isometric and based on action points. It's simple but challenging – and highly satisfying, thanks to the sheer variety of weapons, skills and enemies. The denizens of *UnderRail* have many unique tricks that the player must learn to recognise and counter in order to survive. Many times during my playthroughs, I'd inch my way into a room, toss a flashbang in a likely direction, then dash back out again, hoping to flush out possible lurkers and avoid being back-stabbed.

UnderRail isn't without flaws; it lacks intricate dialogue trees, and meaningful choices and consequences. Still, considering that it was mostly made by one man, these are understandable shortcomings. *UnderRail* is a massive incline, and no CRPG fan should miss it. **JBH**

***UnderRail* was first released in 2012 on Desura, where fans could buy the alpha version to help fund its development; it was a way for indies to crowd-fund before Kickstarter and Steam Early Access.**

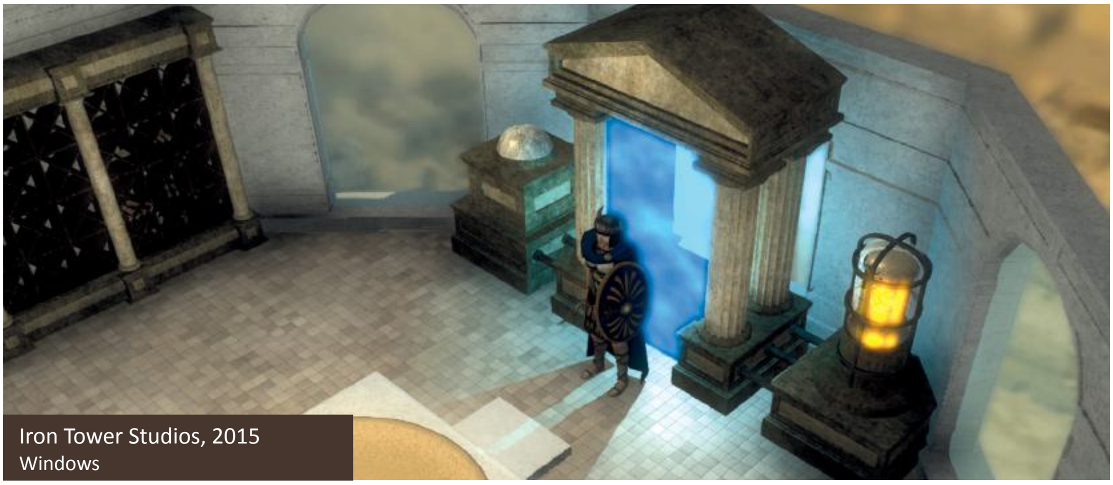


While you control only one character, the combat succeeds at providing plenty of interesting options and challenges



The crafting system is very detailed; you can create almost anything that can be equipped or used, and the wide variety of materials offers plenty of customisation

The Age of Decadence


Iron Tower Studios, 2015
Windows

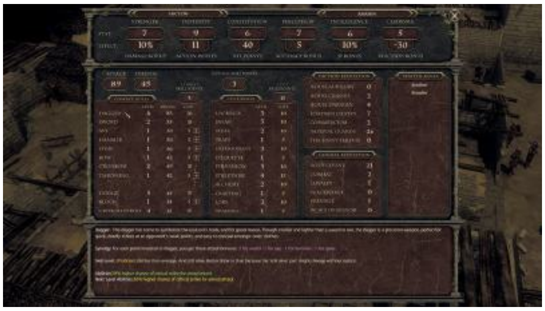
***Age of Decadence* offers a demo on Steam. You can later bring the save file into the full game.**

It's not often a game spends 11 years in development and comes out well. *Age of Decadence*, however, did, and this is far from the only way it defies convention and expectation.

Heavily inspired by *Fallout 1* and *2*, the game takes place in a post-apocalyptic Roman-esque empire. The populace has descended into a sort of cut-throat barbarism, and those that would prey on strangers are more common than those who would help.

The once-glorious empire fell into conflict with a rival nation and both sides called gods and men to fight and die in droves. At least that's what you learn at the start of the game. What actually happened and how must be discovered over multiple playthroughs by skilled characters. Uncovering the backstory of the world is very enjoyable, even if the final result is a bit inconsistent.

Graphically, the game is not impressive at all. The Torque engine would not have been remarkable in 2004, and certainly is not today. That is not to say the game is wholly ugly; some locations have enough art design and tricks to them that they feel impressive when you first see them. This is also helped by the difficulty of getting there and the exoticness that certain places are imbued with by the setting.


AoD has six main attributes and 23 skills, divided into Social and Combat; instead of classes, it offers eight starting backgrounds

AoD is not a game that is kind to completionists. If your lock-picking skill is not up to the task, you will not get to see what's behind a door. The same holds for combat, dialogue and other forms of environmental challenge. This difficulty and approach to stat/skill checks requires adjusting to. In most RPGs, a decently built character will be able to beat every combat encounter, charm the crown off every king and steal all the gold in the land.

In *AoD*, a skilled player might be able to mix two distinct skill sets, but more likely you'll invest everything into a particular method of progress and still occasionally struggle.

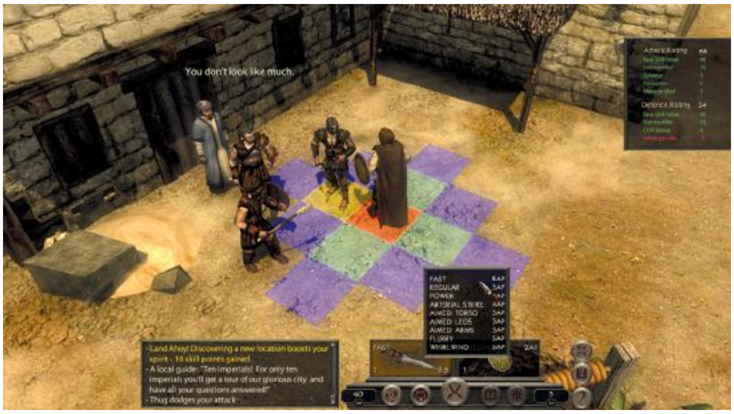
For the turn-based combat, this is actually a plus. There are plenty of viable strategies, and, despite being essentially locked into your first choice of weapons and defence (block or dodge) there's plenty of customisability. For the melee weapons, you have daggers that are fast and weak but great with aimed strikes; swords, hammers and axes that can cause bleeding, armour breakage or mini-crits; and rounding out the melee weapons, there are spears that have good range and can interrupt enemies moving close to you.

For ranged combat, there are bows, crossbows and throwing weapons. Crossbows differ by requiring an action to reload and not scaling with your strength, while throwing weapons are just kind of bad.

Beyond weapons, there's also a decent number of combat tools and consumables – including crafting and alchemy – to round out your options. Many of these are exceptionally powerful and can easily turn the tide of a whole fight when properly applied.

While in some fights you might wish you had a full party to control instead of AI allies, the combat in *AoD* is nonetheless excellent and incredibly satisfying once you achieve some level of expertise.

> "Combat difficulty is integrated into the setting. You can't say that the world is harsh and unforgiving and then allow the player to kill everyone who looks at him or her funny. The game has to be hard, dying should be easy, and you should have reasons to pick your fights."
>
> – *Vince D. Weller,* Age of Decadence*'s creator*



- Land Ahoy! Discovering a new location boosts your spirit - 10 skill points gained.
- A local guide: "Ten imperials! For only ten imperials you'll get a tour of our glorious city and have all your questions answered!"
- Thug dodges your attack

Combat is turn-based and uses action points, offering several types of attack with each weapon

Sadly, the same cannot be said for the environmental challenges and dialogue. Often, they fall into the same trap as many other RPGs: you can just pick the options with the [tags of] skills you have invested in, rarely needing to actually read the text.

In most RPGs, failing a dialogue skill check will simply put you into a fight that anyone with moderate skill can beat. Instead, *AoD* will just kill you mid-dialogue and send you to the main menu to reload or make a new character; sometimes it might also throw you into a fight that's absolutely impossible for your build. In some ways this is frustrating, in others it's pleasantly brutal and unapologetic – the world will not bend to keep you from breaking.

The sins of the dialogue gameplay are really just the same design flaws that essentially all RPG dialogue suffers from. There are, of course, good parts, as there are multiple ways to resolve many quests peacefully. In fact, that's one of *AoD*'s strengths, as it's possible to play pure "talking characters", going through the entire game without ever entering combat.

Some of your choices will also have long-lasting consequences, such as betraying a faction and joining another, or scheming to change the leader of a faction (which changes later quests, as the new leader is not likely to have the same agenda).

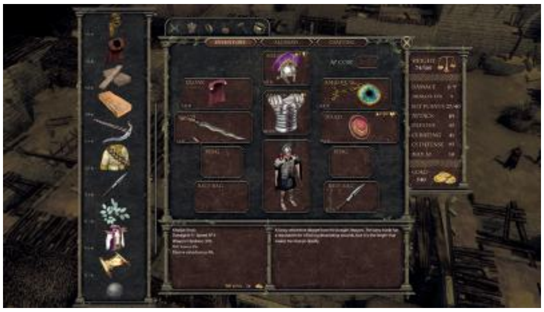
An interesting part of the dialogue design is the frequent use of teleports to reduce walking around. You're routinely offered the option to just immediately go to the person or place that is your goal. If it makes sense in the story, you may even be forced to do so. Sometimes it may feel like you don't have agency, but it's mostly just removing the illusion of agency.

In general, a single playthrough of *AoD* will create more questions than it answers. Each character will typically join one of the six major factions and then be responsible for making events unfold in favour of that faction. However, events will occur even without the player, and learning the reasons behind them will require playing other factions as well.

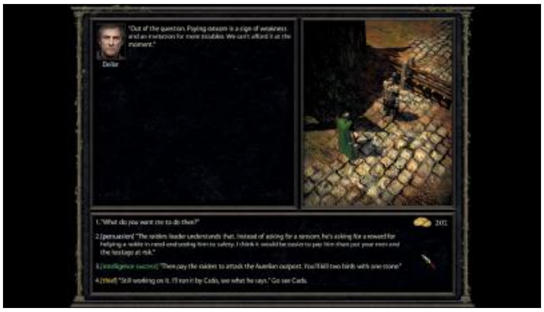
Of the factions, one is dedicated to pure talking characters and two focus heavily on combat, while the remainder generally allow for both types of character to get through, as long as you make the right choices about who to support and who to betray.

Age of Decadence is frequently frustrating, obtuse and a bit constricting. But, with an excellent combat system and Choose-Your-Own-Adventure dialogues that often present interesting non-combat gameplay, it's also a very good RPG. Regardless, it's worth playing simply because it ignores many deeply ingrained design conventions and offers viable alternatives. **JA**

Iron Tower used *Age of Decadence*'s assets and combat system (now with party members) to develop *Dungeon Rats*, a combat-focused RPG released in 2016.

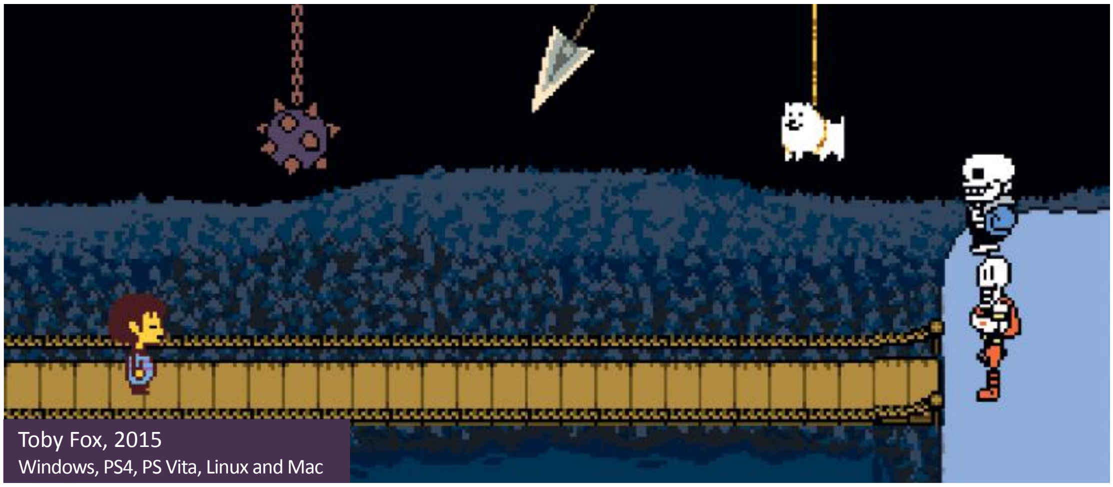


There are several qualities of weapons and armour, as well as items needed for crafting, alchemy, disguises, etc.



Some segments play like Choose Your Own Adventures, entirely based on dialogues, items you carry and skill checks

Undertale

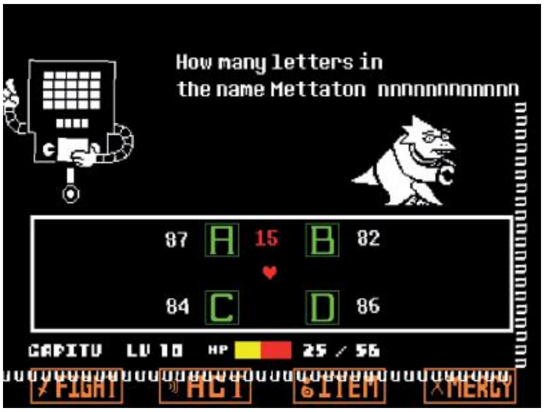


Toby Fox, 2015
Windows, PS4, PS Vita, Linux and Mac

Undertale was originally pitched on Kickstarter as an RPG "where no one has to get hurt". It drops you, a human child, alone into an underground world of hostile monsters, but gives you the choice to spare them instead of killing them.

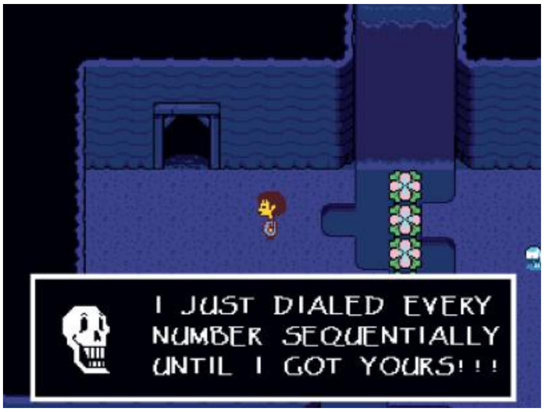
And the game makes a strong case for it – the monsters are endearing, with simple desires like being a pet, or some laughs for their bad stand-up comedy. If you give them what they want, they'll leave you alone.

***Undertale* raised $51k on Kickstarter in 2013. It went on to sell over two and a half million copies.**



How many letters in the name Mettaton nnnnnnnnnnn

Undertale uses the medium itself as a narrative tool: battles, UI, music and even the save files are used for characterisation and storytelling



I JUST DIALED EVERY NUMBER SEQUENTIALLY UNTIL I GOT YOURS!!!

Dialogue with the charismatic cast of monsters is easily *Undertale*'s strongest point – it's consistently funny and well-timed

While some RPGs present nonviolence as a series of choices in a text tree which might let you sidestep combat, *Undertale* integrates them into its turn-based battles. You can attack, but for each monster you can instead perform various actions, like "Compliment" and "Threat", which might help pacify them.

During the enemy's turns you control your Soul, a tiny red heart, and must dodge monster attacks in a brief bullet-hell sequence. Boss battles often change the mechanics of dodging by painting your Soul a different colour – when it's blue, for example, your Soul is subject to gravity and can jump. It's a simple enough system, but manages to stay fresh for the whole game.

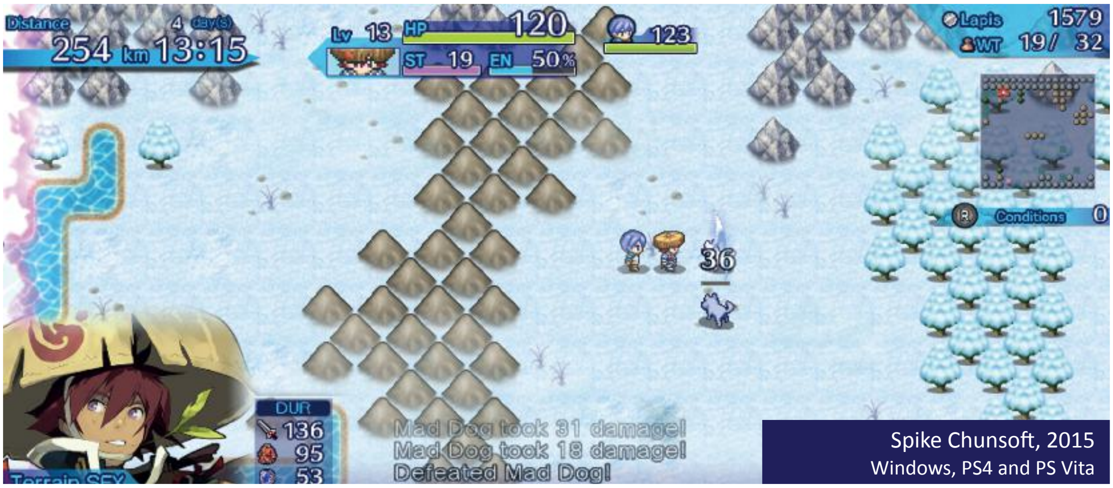
The morality of *Undertale* leaves no room for ambiguity or nuance, but the game's dedication to it is what stands out. Forming deeper friendships with the strange and entertaining monsters of the underground is interesting and rewarding; killing them feels terrible, and the rest of the cast won't let you forget.

The game even reserves a special kind of hell for any player who goes out of their way to kill everyone "just to see all of the game's content …"

While the game's art is rather simple, the music is outstanding. It's a memorable and catchy mix of chiptunes and piano, weaving various themes throughout its tracks in many different styles. Having made the game all by himself, Toby Fox manages to fully utilise every visual, audio and technical aspect available to convey the desired narrative and tone.

Knowing more beforehand would spoil the fun. *Undertale* is not a long game – you'll beat it in about five hours – but it's an immensely clever game, full of surprises and worth replaying. It's a worthy successor to its clear influence, the *Mother/Earthbound* series, and I can't wait to see what kind of games will inherit *Undertale*'s influence after its stunning success. **MAS**

Mystery Chronicle: One Way Heroics



Mad Dog took 31 damage!
Mad Dog took 18 damage!
Defeated Mad Dog!

Spike Chunsoft, 2015
Windows, PS4 and PS Vita

In 2010, a Roguelike called *One Way Heroics* was released in Japan. Developed by SmokingWOLF, it added a clever twist to the genre: instead of exploring deep dungeons, your goal is to march east, running from an all-devouring darkness.

The game plays much like a traditional Roguelike: it's turn-based, has permadeath and unidentified items, etc. But, like an old-school side-scrolling game, the screen automatically goes right; if you're slow, you die.

This adds a whole new dimension to the game. Not only must you worry about items and enemies, but also consider terrain and time – "can I get in and out of that house and grab the treasure chest before the screen reaches me? If not, can I break its wall?"

Initially, your goal is to walk east until you find the Demon Lord and defeat him, but things get more elaborate as you play. Every time you finish the game (or die) you're rated on how many enemies you've killed and levels you've gained, plus distances walked, money gathered and feats performed. This score earns you points used to unlock new classes, perks, NPCs, quest givers and other metagame features.

This mitigates the frustration of permadeath, as even in death you get a sense of accomplishment. Your first playthroughs will also be quite short and simple, slowly expanding as you pursue harder challenges.

Each world is randomly generated, but you can note down their codes and visit them multiple times or share them with friends. Each day the game offers special worlds, with events like 3× Experience or secret NPCs, that are available only for a limited time. You can also customise the difficulty, with four settings and the option to disable the metagame aid.

The game was quite successful worldwide, and in 2014 it received the *Plus* expansion, which added new classes, items, terrains and UI improvements.

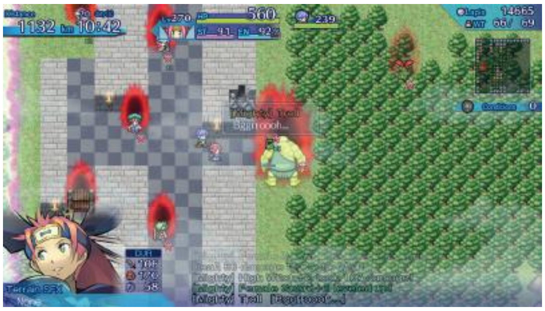
In an unusual turn of events, developers from Spike Chunsoft saw the game and loved it, cutting a deal with SmokingWOLF to remake *One Way Heroics* as a spin-off from its Mystery Dungeon series.

The result is *Mystery Chronicle: One Way Heroics*. Extremely faithful to the original, it offers 25 classes, great artwork and some slight changes to the story and mechanics. It also added a competitive multiplayer mode, but sadly it's very rare to find anyone online.

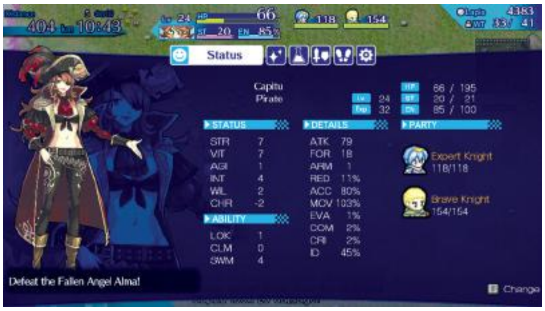
Despite these upgrades, some fans still prefer the original game with the *Plus* expansion, disliking the remake's balance changes and weaker soundtrack.

Regardless of version, *One Way Heroics* remains an excellent game, accessible and challenging while offering a new twist to the Roguelike genre. **FE**

The original *One Way Heroics* had an excellent soundtrack. You can use the *OWH Music* mod to play the remake using these songs.



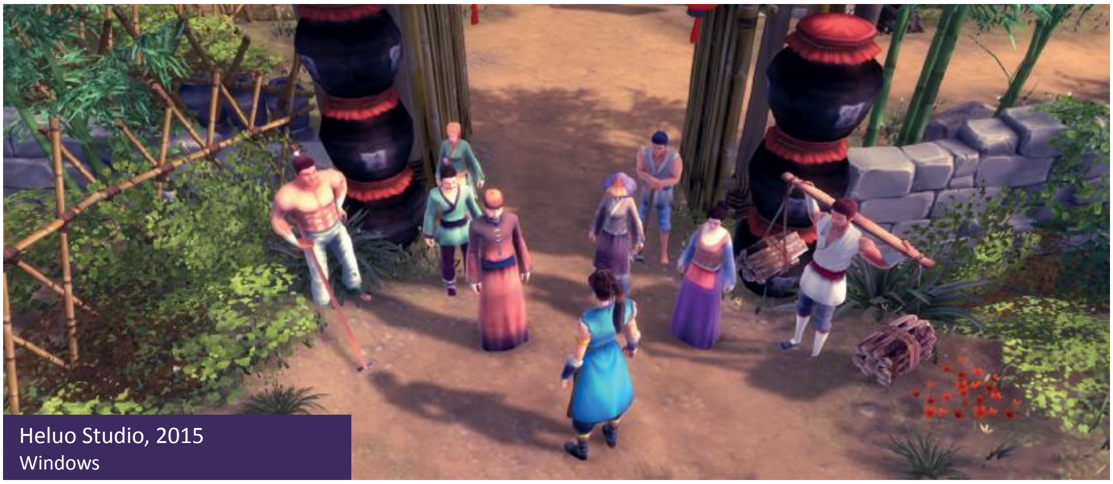
A thick wall or a monster with a lot of health can be deadly, locking you in place until the screen reaches your character



Captu
Pirate
Lv 24
Exp 32
HP 86 / 195
ST 20 / 21
EN 85 / 100
STR 7
VIT 7
AGI 1
INT 4
WIL 2
CHR -2
ATK 79
FOR 18
ARM 1
RED 11%
ACC 80%
MOV 103%
EVA 1%
COM 2%
CRI 2%
ID 45%
LOK 1
CLM 0
SWM 4
Expert Knight 118/118
Brave Knight 154/154
Defeat the Fallen Angel Alma!

The game uses stats as a resource: hiring NPCs as companions costs Charisma, while learning spells costs Intelligence. You can boost stats by choosing Perks at the start.

Tale of Wuxia



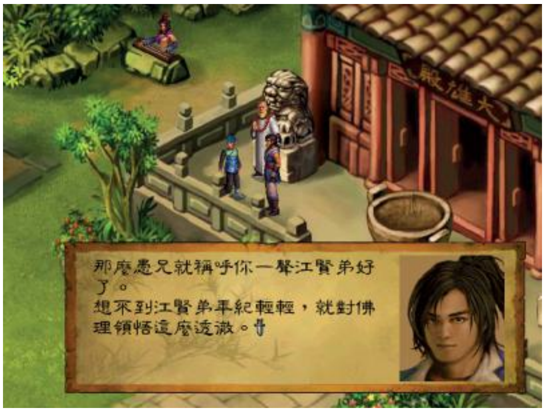
Heluo Studio, 2015
Windows

In 1996, Soft-World – a gaming publisher headquartered in Taiwan – tasked one of its teams, Heluo Studio, to make a game based on the novels of famed wuxia writer Jin Yong.

They created *Heroes of Jin Yong* (金庸群俠傳), a tactical role-playing game in which the player gets to roam China in an age of honourable martial arts heroes, populated by a mix of all Jin Yong's novels' characters and plots. During your travels it's possible to change certain storylines and recruit over 30 characters to brawl it out with various villains and heroes.

Five years later, the same team made a sequel titled 武林群侠传 – loosely translated as *Legend of Wulin Heroes* (not to be confused with the tabletop RPG of the same name), and set one hundred years after the first game, with new characters and an original plot. It retained the open world and tactical RPG elements of its predecessor, but also introduced a new *Princess Maker*-like sim-raising mode, in which your character's growth is determined by a weekly training schedule set by the player, presented in a humorous, chibi art style.

Jin Yong is a highly acclaimed contemporary Chinese author. He has written 15 books based on wuxia (martial arts and chivalry), which together have sold over 100 million copies and been adapted into over 90 movies and TV series.



那麼愚兄就稱呼你一聲江賢弟好了。
想不到江賢弟年紀輕輕，就對佛理領悟這麼透徹。

Legend of Wulin Heroes was also never translated into English, but it's known as one of the best Chinese RPGs ever made

You play as a nobody who dreams of becoming a martial arts hero. He is guided by your hand in training, with up to 32 stats (not including hidden ones) being available for the player to improve. All of them are useful in one way or another – if perhaps not in battle, then surely interwoven into various events.

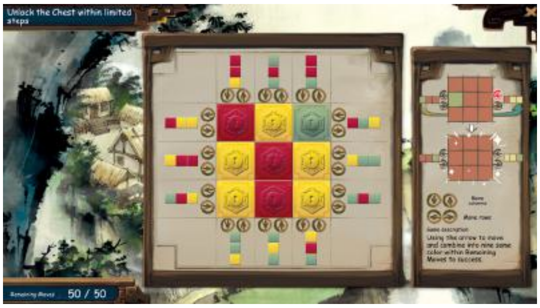
You'll be able to learn several kung fu styles, categorised into Saber, Sword, Staff, Palm/Fist, Finger, Leg, Hidden Weapon and Music, with their corresponding stats affecting the techniques that your hero finds during his journey or learns from his master when he is pleased with his pupil.

The hero's many base stats also affect his overall competency in battle, such as Flexibility providing a passive boost to damage and enhancing most sword techniques. In fact, some techniques have a third stat to boost their power, such as alcohol for the Drunken Fist style. Yes, you can learn to become skilled in alcohol in this game!

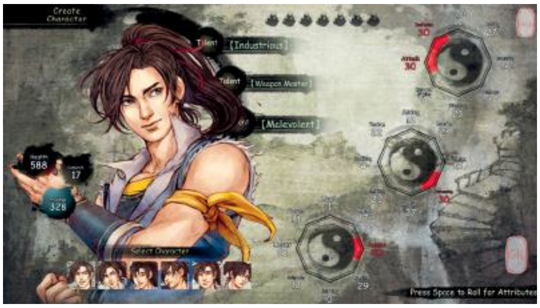
Aside from preparing the hero for combat, you'll also have chores like chopping wood or cleaning, and can choose to indulge in activities like fishing, hunting, smithing, herb-gathering and gardening – each with its own list of diverse mini-games.

Your performance in these mini-games will determine the skills gained and add rewards such as rare meat from killing a bear while hunting, or a treasure chest as a no-error bonus when mining.

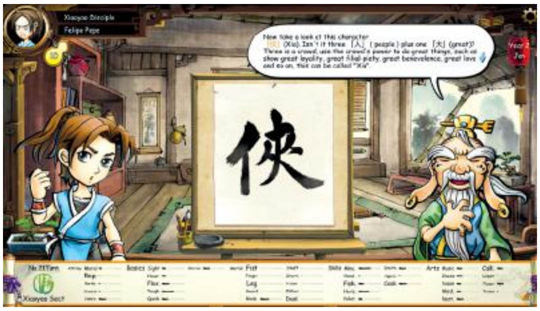
You can also learn more about different aspects of Chinese culture, such as Chinese Chess, Calligraphy, Acupuncture, Music and even Gardening. A lot of care went into these, and not only will you get interesting lessons, but you'll later be asked to identify songs, calligraphy styles and acupuncture points or decide upon a chess move – with your performance impacting the bonus your character receives.



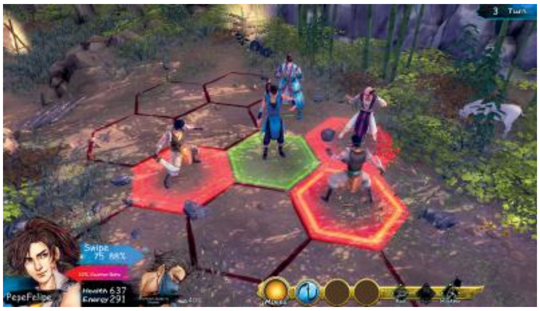
Tale of Wuxia offers a large variety of mini-games, from lock-picking to blacksmithing; most of them are excellent



You roll your character at the start of the game, with three passive talents and over 20 stats to consider



The training mode is presented in a chibi art style and it's filled with events and lessons on Chinese culture



Combat is turn-based, and was expanded in the remake to feature hexes and some impressive animations

After a certain number of weeks have passed, the hero will be tasked with plot-related missions. While some will be just a series of battles, others allow you to freely roam around town for a time (such as until a ceremony begins), and you're able to explore, talk to NPCs, buy items, do side-quests and find secrets.

There are often long-lasting consequences based on your actions and, depending on which faction you wish to side with, it might even be good to "fail" a mission, although generally not by losing in battle.

These missions also serve as a good wake-up call to let the player know if the hero's kung fu is lagging behind – if battles are too difficult, you can catch up during the next weeks of training.

Players are given the freedom to exercise their will upon each event and their actions will affect future events one way or another. At least 30 NPCs can be befriended through events and gifts, and they will greatly contribute to your success in future endeavours and possibly unlock certain events that lead to treasures and new kung fu teachings. Furthermore, six of these companions are romanceable heroines with unique events for you to pursue!

The game can be difficult for those who neglect to train their hero, but the versatility of approaches in each playthrough and the amount of freedom to raise your hero make replaying the game highly enjoyable and are part of the charm.

Overall, there's enough variety in kung fu styles, skills, events, routes, endings, NPCs and achievements to guarantee at least three full playthroughs.

Regrettably, Heluo Studio was later disbanded, a victim of the large shift among Chinese publishers (including Soft-World) towards MMOs and online gaming. However, *Legend of Wulin Heroes* remained a cult classic among the Chinese fanbase, motivating its original creators to reform Heluo Studio with a new publisher and create a modern, fully 3D remake.

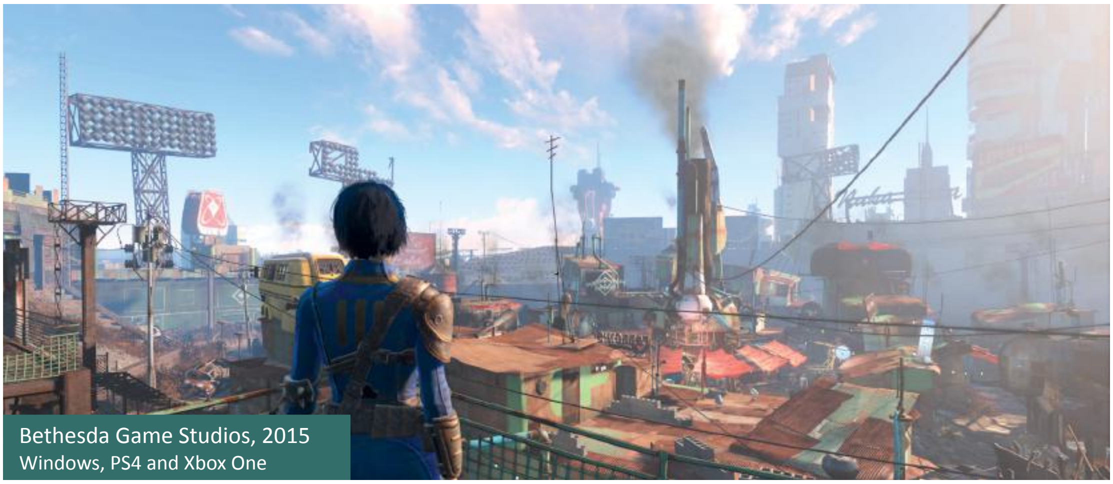
Released in 2015 as 侠客风云传, it was the first game of the series to be officially translated into English, published on Steam in 2016 as *Tale of Wuxia*. Besides the many graphical upgrades, the remake also gave the developers the chance to refine and expand the game's story and events, improve its mini-games, upgrade the combat to a hex-based system, add a new day-night cycle with timed NPC schedules and increase the number of romanceable heroines.

The remake was soon followed by *Tale of Wuxia: The Pre-Sequel* (2017), which abandons the raising sim aspect for a more traditional JRPG-style, with full party control and a fixed protagonist.

Tale of Wuxia and its prequel still have some annoying bugs, and the crowd-sourced translation is rather uneven and messy, but they're definitely worth playing. It's a truly one-of-a-kind wuxia experience that you aren't likely to find elsewhere. **NY**

The Chinese version of *Tale of Wuxia* received several DLCs after release, adding more content and new romances, but these were never translated into English.

Fallout 4



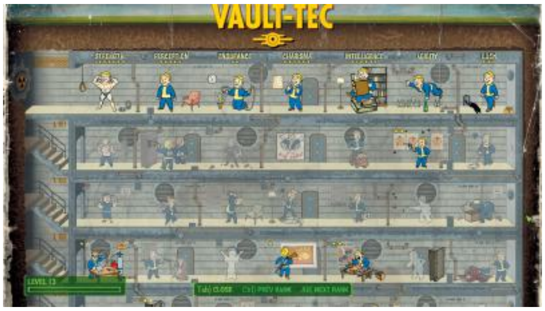
Bethesda Game Studios, 2015
Windows, PS4 and Xbox One

Role-playing games have always been hard to judge and categorise, due to their hybrid nature. In essence, RPGs are the games that strongly aspire towards being better than the sum of their parts. With this in mind, *Fallout 4* is the superlative example of the opposite.

***Fallout 4* received six DLC packs, released once a month from March to August 2016. They add new areas, new items and more options when crafting or building settlements.**

There is not a single element in the game that can be pointed out as utterly sub-par, but the issue here is one of legacy and focus. The venerable *Fallout* franchise started out as the seminal isometric RPG that offered world reactivity with respect to the player's character build. In the old games, a low-intelligence brawler would have many differences in their experience from that of a smooth-talking pistolero. All of this was wrapped in a post-apocalyptic '50s retro sci-fi atmosphere in which old-world saccharine consumerism contrasted with the realistic struggle for survival in a radioactive wasteland.

Fallout 4 shows its inability to understand the basic premise of its origins right from the get-go. The game begins with a pre-war couple going about their daily lives and answering the door to a salesman before the nuclear bombs hit and they must take shelter in one of the iconic Vaults, where they are cryogenically frozen for two centuries before beginning their adventure.



Stats, skills and perks are all combined into a single system; at each level you gain one point, which can be used to increase stats or unlock a new perk

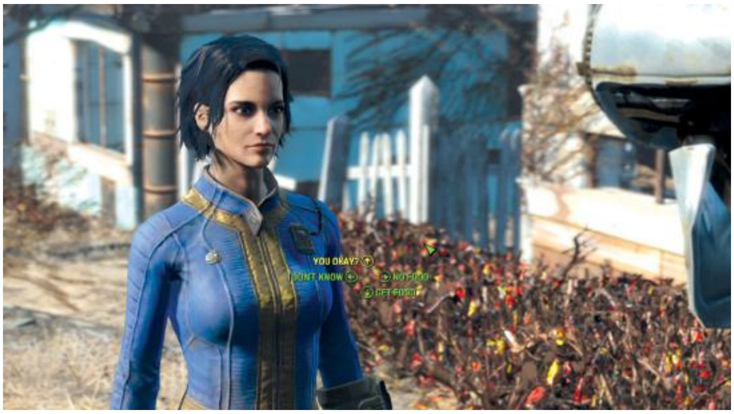
This is a woefully improper scene, due to the old world being the Mr. Rogers to the new world's Mad Max. These people were meant to be depicted primarily through their unnaturally gleeful cultural artefacts – demystifying them undermines the entire premise. It should also be mentioned that the salesman is encountered again as an immortal ghoul who has not changed his clothes or disposition in 200 years. The original *Fallout* games could be ironic, post-modern or just plain irreverent, but never outright stupid. Sadly, this salesman ghoul is indicative of the writing quality *Fallout 4* displays throughout.

These changes should come as no surprise, since the franchise's systemic identity is no more. The process Bethesda began in *Fallout 3* was somewhat halted by Obsidian's *Fallout: New Vegas,* but is now complete in *Fallout 4*. Character builds have been reduced from being representations of good and bad traits that affect the game world to a single character build that may deal more damage with some weapons than others. There are no skills such as Repair, Scientist or Doctor that get checked in conversation or during encounters anymore. Instead you have a system in which one point per level is invested in perks that focus almost entirely on combat or loot, with a few scatter-shot nods to exploration.

Given the prestige of the developer, conversations are now a depressingly low-budget affair, in which every player response must have four options because that is how many buttons there are on a controller. This results in yes/no answers being accompanied by absolute filler, usually marked "sarcastic", or the occasional charisma attribute check that might unlock new options but mostly gives a small experience boost. In short, *Fallout* this is not; and even more alarmingly, an RPG this is not.

"We do like to try new things and we have some successes. I think the shooting in *Fallout 4* is really good – I think it plays really well. Obviously the way we did some dialogue stuff, that didn't work as well. But I know the reasons we tried that – to make a nice interactive conversation – but [it was] less successful than some other things in the game. For us, we take that feedback. I think long-term."

– Todd Howard,
Fallout 4*'s creative director*



Fallout 4 goes for a cinematic, BioWare-like dialogue system, with fully voiced dialogues and their own take on the Dialogue Wheel

But even ignoring this series' roots, the most recurrent element within this open-world shooter masquerading as a role-playing game is the complete, almost desperate, lack of direction when it comes to how it is put together. It chases after modern trends, instead of chiselling them into a coherent product.

The more polished shooting mechanics – greatly improved since *Fallout 3* – are contrasted with the statistical nature of the combat, which Bethesda inherited but doesn't know how to handle. The result is a dreadful game experience, in which you'll keep pumping the same enemy full of dozens of head shots, which the animations try to meaningfully sell.

One of *Fallout 4*'s most publicised features, the ability to build your own settlements, is entirely disconnected from the rest of the game. You could rebuild the entire wasteland and nothing would change, relegating the entire affair to a bloated mini-game rather than something that was meant to work in tandem with the game's other elements.

The main quest tries so hard to come up with dramatic hooks regarding one of your loved ones or the nature of being human, yet these fail completely. There's no place for them in a sandbox designed for a player running for hours on end from building to building, shooting and looting everything in sight.

The entire experience of travelling the wasteland that this game presents is one of mixing a dozen different puzzle sets and then trying to make them fit; it is an experience of witnessing developer exasperation as they work on something that works against itself.

My personal feelings are that all of the elements in *Fallout 4* could be part of a great game, but no great game can come from the way these elements are used – only digestible mediocrity, which has been achieved in spades here. **LL**

In August 2017, Bethesda released the Creation Club, a service that sells mods curated by the company.

Mods:

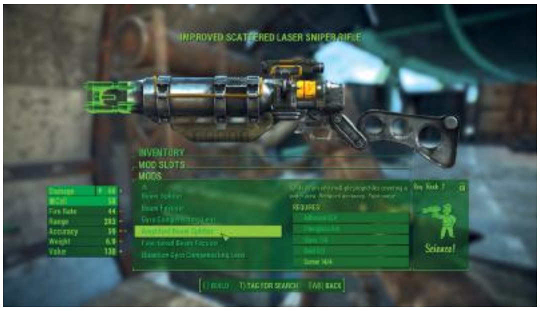
Unofficial Fallout 4 Patch: Fixes hundreds of bugs left by the developers. A must-have for any player.

Full Dialogue Interface: Makes dialogue options display the full text characters will say, not just short lines.

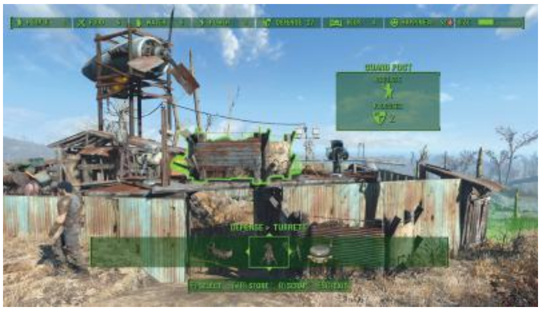
DEF_UI: Similar to *Skyrim*'s SkyUI, it greatly improves the game's UI to work with mouse and keyboard.

Armoursmith Extended: An excellent mod that gives players more options and control over their armour, allowing you to mix and match multiple layers.

Sim Settlements: Overhauls how settlements work, so settlers build and expand them by themselves. This massive mod has its own expansion packs.

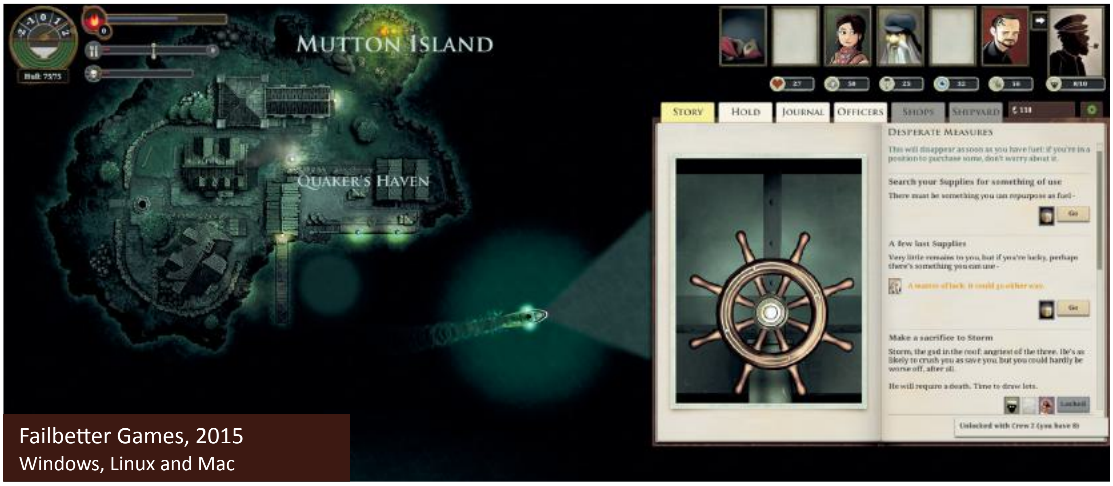


Weapons and armour now have multiple parts and can be customised using scrap and the new crafting system



You can build settlements using scrap collected all over the wasteland; while initially engaging, this lacks in impact

Sunless Sea



DESPERATE MEASURES

This will disappear as soon as you have fuel: if you're in a position to purchase some, don't worry about it.

Search your Supplies for something of use

There must be something you can repurpose as fuel -

A few last Supplies

Very little remains to you, but if you're lucky, perhaps there's something you can use -

A matter of luck: it could go either way.

Make a sacrifice to Storm

Storm, the god in the roof: angriest of the three. He's as likely to crush you as save you, but you could hardly be worse off, after all.

He will require a death. Time to draw lots.

Unlocked with Crew 2 (you have 8)

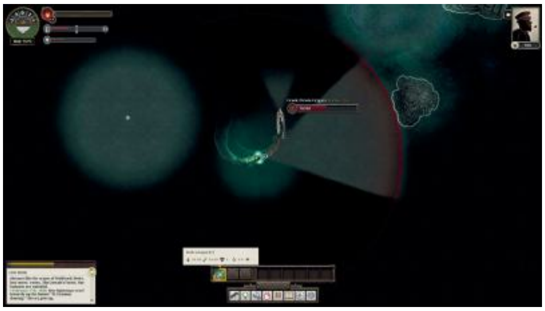
Failbetter Games, 2015
Windows, Linux and Mac

The dark and the ocean. *Sunless Sea*'s title contains the most potent metaphors for the unknown, and it very much hinges upon the two reactions that the unknown elicits: fear and curiosity.

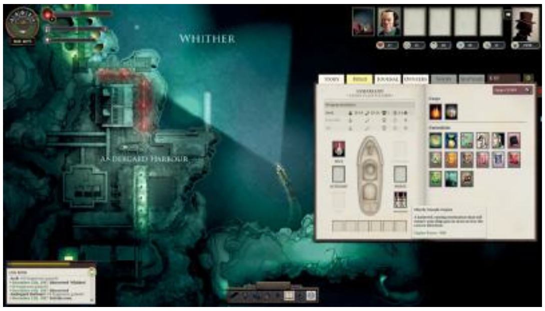
As a captain in Failbetter Games' *Fallen London* universe, it's your task to explore the strange islands of the vast Unterzee. Every trip is accompanied by risks and costs. Traversing the waters consumes rations and fuel, while your crew's fear grows. Of course, there are creatures lurking in the dark that might weaken you further, damaging your hull and killing your crew.

Once your ship enters a port, *Sunless Sea* reveals its text-heavy nature: its strange places are described in vivid prose that oscillates rapidly between innocent whimsy and macabre terror.

***Sunless Sea* is a spin-off of *Fallen London,* a free-to-play browser game from 2009. *Sunless Sea* was crowdfunded in 2013, raising £100,803. Its sequel, *Sunless Skies*, was crowdfunded in 2017 and raised £377,952.**



Not every danger is unseen – you'll need to upgrade your ship to survive pirates and monsters in real-time, cooldown-driven battles



While exploring you'll have to manage food supplies, fuel reserves, cargo slots and an ever-increasing terror driving you mad

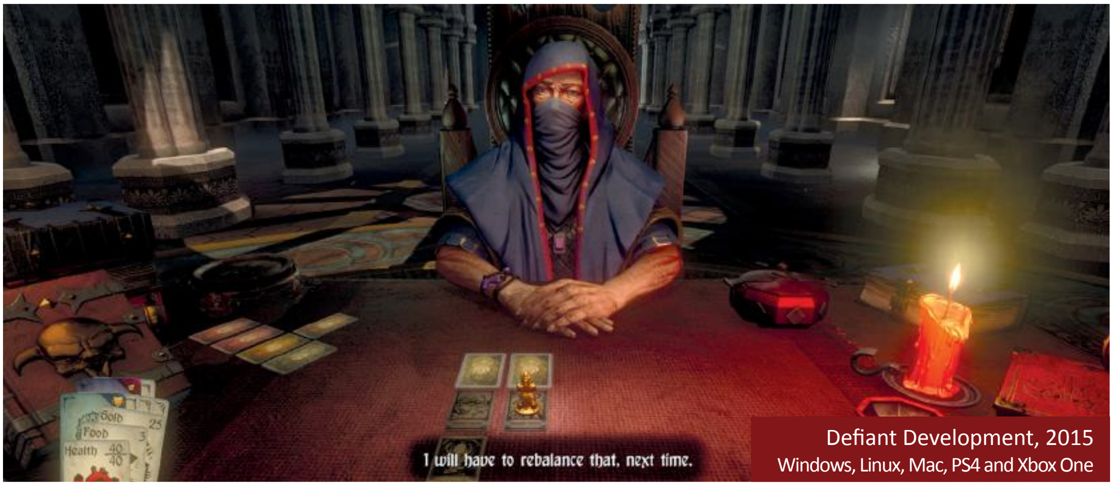
Torn between fear and curiosity, the player will have to make choices – will you open the sealed coffin? Will you give the stranger a ride to the next island? Will you dare eat the sea monster's meat? The likelihood of success for some actions depends on the strengths of your attributes; many others will be available if you're willing to pay a price: gold, fuel, food, crew members, treasures, Fragments of Secrets (i.e. experience points), or even attribute points.

If you manage to return to London alive, you can collect the bounties for your accomplishments and hope that the sacrifices made allow you to come out ahead. On your next trip, you may be able to undertake actions that were previously locked to you. If, however, you perish among eldritch horrors and cannibals, the game will have to be played from the very beginning and the Unterzee's islands will be randomly redistributed. But you may play as your heir, cashing in on heirlooms you have left to yourself.

Sunless Sea is inarguably an RPG, but one that isn't tied to conventions. Most RPGs are structured around progression and exploration; *Sunless Sea* subverts both. Despite there being an ultimate goal to achieve, there isn't a linear sequence of main quests that leads you to it. Instead, you have countless small "storylets" that are only vaguely interdependent. Also, progression isn't fixed, and whatever rewards you gain can easily be lost. Exploration, a major part of the game, is never free, neither of care nor cost. *Sunless Sea* imbues the journey into the unknown with danger and mystery.

Sunless Sea is one of the few games that lives in the mind as much as on the screen; its secrets aren't just there to be ticked off, but to be savoured. Sometimes, imagining what lies in the Zee is the best way to enjoy the game. How fitting for a game about the dark and the ocean. **AI**

Hand of Fate



I will have to rebalance that, next time.

Defiant Development, 2015
Windows, Linux, Mac, PS4 and Xbox One

Hand of Fate is a rather peculiar Roguelike. Not only because its places, objects and characters are drawn from a deck of cards. Nor is it because the dungeon takes the form of a tortuous path made of these face-down cards, in which you move card after card while keeping an eye on a quickly diminishing stock of food.

Hand of Fate is very special because it puts the player in front of a game master – literally. It is this odd, masked wizard surrounded by magical objects who gives the game its edge. With his melodramatic gestures, he turns into an epic narrative what would otherwise be nothing more than yet another medieval fantasy adventure. With his sizzling, masterfully-voiced comments, he gives depth to each game. A *Hand of Fate* playthrough is not a series of random events and encounters – it is a duel of resilience, the clash of two wills that collide.

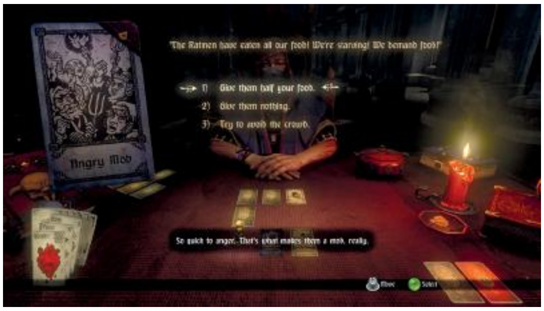
In this fight, the player's only weapons are the new cards he earns and adds to his deck when he solves a situation in an optimal way – for instance, saving an old man attacked by Lava Golems grants a new event card that will be advantageous to come across in the dungeon. As the stock of cards increases, the player can therefore build a deck to suit his needs, made of the most beneficial encounters possible. And threaten the game master's supremacy.

To beat the game, you also have to master what is perhaps its weakest mechanic: its combat system – either triggered by a bad choice or automatically by certain cards. This simplified imitation of the battles of the Batman: Arkham Asylum series is based on beating your opponents by clubbing the mouse button, and remains far inferior to the rest of the game. It would be a shame, however, to give *Hand of Fate* a miss because of its combat system.

Persevering leads to terrific moments: a narrative that gets closer and closer to perfection (thanks to quality music, meticulous writing and a darkening atmosphere), cards that turn out to be complex quests (completing the first card grants the second one, to be added to the deck), and a game master who is thrown into a foul mood at the prospect of defeat.

While the sequel, *Hand of Fate 2* (2017), doesn't improve the combat system, it expands the campaign considerably, adding longer and more diverse sub-intrigues. Unfortunately, the returning game master is a little more restrained. The almost total absence of his threatening figure turns the game into something that you simply want to complete, rather than a duel of egos that you are desperate to win. **IZ**

***Hand of Fate* was crowd-funded on Kickstarter in November 2013, raising $54,095 AUD.**

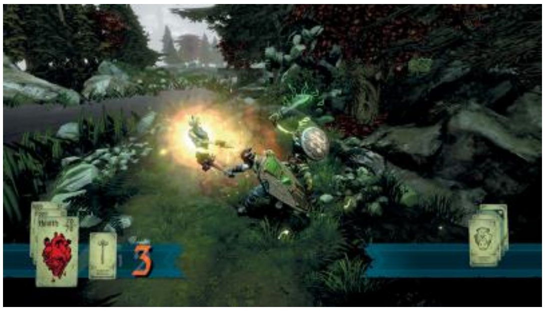


"The Ratmen have eaten all our food! We're starving! We demand food!"

1) Give them half your food.
2) Give them nothing.
3) Try to avoid the crowd.

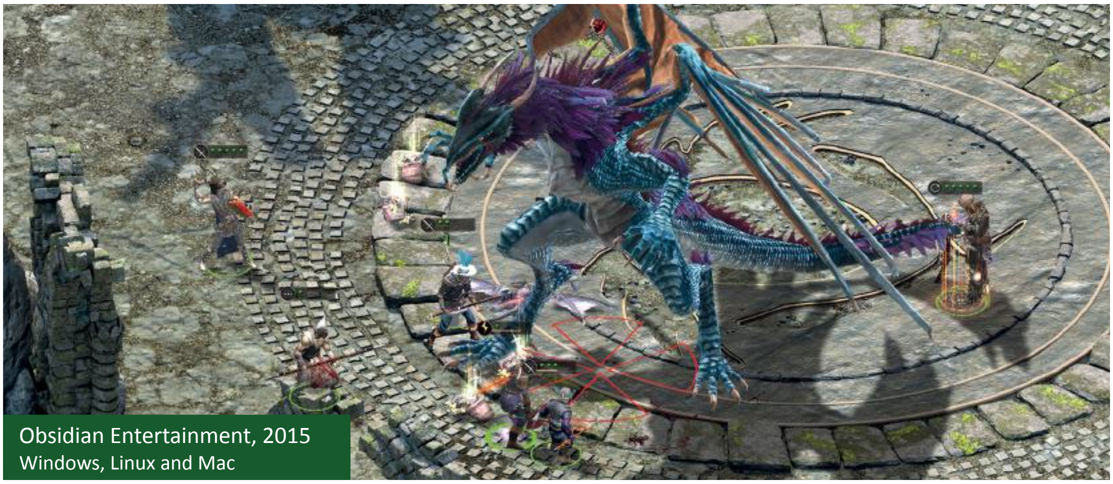
So quick to anger. That's what makes them a mob, really.

Each card has multiple options, and solving it correctly provides rewards and possibly a new card that advances the quest



Combat is the weakest part of the game, forcing you fight in a *Batman: Arkham Asylum*-like manner using the equipment cards you own

Pillars of Eternity



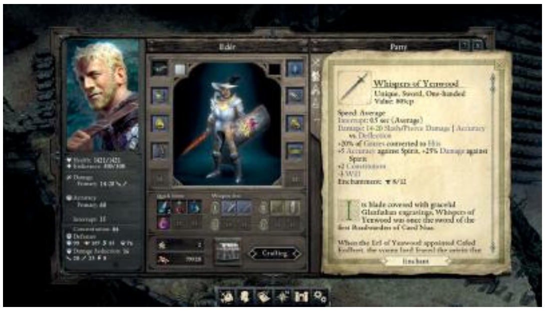
Obsidian Entertainment, 2015
Windows, Linux and Mac

The **Pillars *of Eternity*** Kickstarter launched in September 2012 and raised over 4 million dollars. A documentary called ***Road to Eternity*** later revealed that the crowd-funding saved Obsidian from closing.

The emergence of crowd-funding in the early 2010s created a new class of games between mainstream AAA titles and shoestring budget indies. Among these was Obsidian's "Project Eternity", which hit Kickstarter in 2012, promising to bring back the glory days of the Infinity Engine games, citing *Planescape: Torment*, *Baldur's Gate*, and *Icewind Dale.*

A public that had been disappointed time and again ate it up. The game reached its funding goal in under 24 hours, and its success took Obsidian by surprise. They scrambled to come up with stretch goals and backer rewards to keep the pledges rolling in. This exhilarating but chaotic campaign left its mark on the game: the world is peppered with out-of-place vanity NPCs with exotic looks and frankly stupid nameplates, tombs are full of backer memorials and the game has a tacked-on mega-dungeon and stronghold that would have worked better as a *Durlag's Tower*-style expansion.

Regardless, *Pillars of Eternity* delivers the big game promised in the campaign. There are two large cities and two smaller quest-hub villages; wilderness maps, dungeons, caves, ruins and castles aplenty; 11 character classes; dozens of monster types, spells, and talents, hundreds of items and enough quests for a single playthrough to soak up many weekends.



The inventory is very nostalgic, but offers modern conveniences like mouseovers and neat details like secondary weapons appearing on the character's model

It took a while for all this complexity to settle down, as Obsidian spent two years iterating upon it via post-release patches, but this smoothed out the rough edges and allowed the system to come into its own.

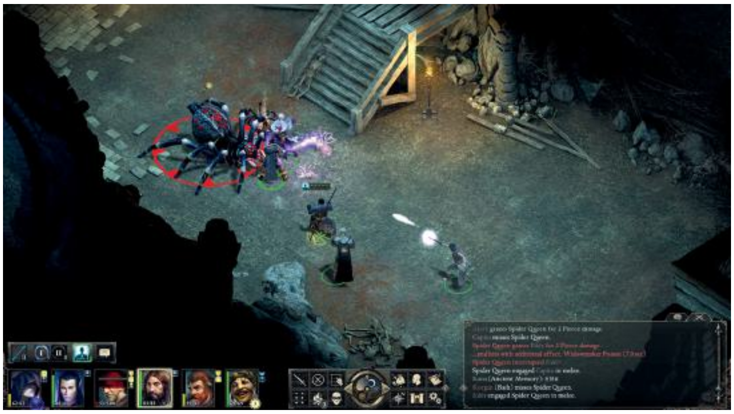
An Infinity Engine game veteran jumping into *Pillars of Eternity* will feel immediately at home. The sounds and visuals, complemented by Justin Bell's beautiful musical score, are just like they ought to be; the moment-to-moment feeling of commanding units is just right, and quests and dialogues behave exactly like they used to – or even better, thanks to quality-of-life improvements like mouseovers, a Fast-Forward function and a "loot all" button. Only after a few hours' playing do the differences start to become apparent.

While *Pillars of Eternity*'s combat is still of the RTwP variety, its original ruleset has more in common with 4th edition *D&D* than the old *AD&D* which powered the IE games. All character classes will acquire a broad selection of abilities selected on level-up, many of which will have per-rest or per-encounter uses.

Combat also features an engagement system, whereby melee combatants lock each other in position and can't move under the risk of taking an opportunistic attack. Unless you go out of your way to build a mobile party with mainly passive abilities, fights will be more static than in the Infinity Engine games, and you will pause more to fire off those per-encounter abilities. It's also much easier to hold a line or block enemy movement, and a good deal harder to run through enemy lines to get at their back-row casters.

Pillars is also markedly easier than *Baldur's Gate* or *Icewind Dale*. Players enjoying a challenge are well advised to go straight to Hard or Path of the Damned difficulties, and avoid going into the *White March* expansion until the very end or risk out-levelling and out-gearing the second half of the game.

> “If anything, I think with the benefit of hindsight, we probably could’ve dialled back our Kickstarter stretch goals. They achieved their purpose at the time, which was to drum up enthusiasm among the backers, but some of the bigger goals probably cost quite a lot more to develop than they brought in – the second city, the megadungeon, and the expansion come to mind. Smaller scope would’ve afforded us more polish time.”
>
> *– Eric Fenstermaker,*
> PoE*’s lead narrative designer*



Combat looks similar to the IE games’, but plays very differently due to additions like the engagement system and per encounter abilities

The story starts you off with a magical catastrophe that sends you after a mysterious villain operating ancient machinery to nefarious ends, while you deal with local problems ranging from personal tragedies and village disputes to a magical plague affecting the entire realm. It unfolds through traditional RPG quests, punctuated by Choose Your Own Adventure-style interludes with beautiful ink illustrations.

The world of Eora features elves and dwarves, undead haunting ancient ruins, dragons lurking in remote corners of the world, and gods meddling with mortals. However, it has a Renaissance feel, rather than a medieval one. Adventurers tote arquebuses and pistols; caravels ply the seas carrying explorers, merchants, and colonists to new frontiers; and societies struggle to come to grips with transformational discoveries.

Accompanying you are eight distinct companions (11 with the expansion) hailing from all corners of Eora, from Sagani the Boreal Dwarf huntress to Kana Rua, the jolly chanter from seafaring Rauatai. They are for the most part well-written and characterful, and their banter provides welcome levity in a story that often takes on perilously dark tones. You can also complement – or, if you wish, entirely replace – these companions with custom adventurers you can create from scratch at inns.

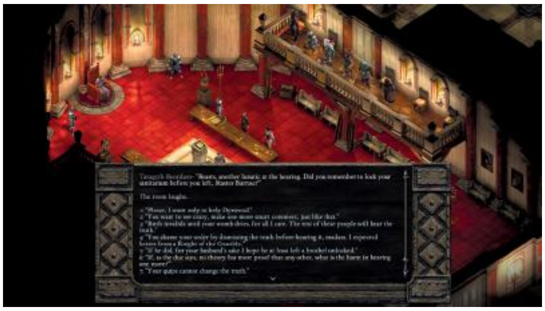
Overall, *Pillars of Eternity* fails to live up to the best of the originals in some respects, but surpasses them in others. While competent enough, the writing does not come close to *Planescape: Torment*’s; Defiance Bay and Twin Elms feel empty and static compared to Athkatla or Baldur’s Gate, and even the best encounters do not quite match the likes of Firkraag’s Dungeon.

The character system, however, is a major step forward. *Pillars*’ 11 classes and highly flexible talent, ability, and attribute system allow massive scope for variety, from relatively obvious variants like a ranged, alpha-striking back-row Paladin, to specialised builds making use of a particular item’s unique properties. *Pillars of Eternity*’s lead designer Josh Sawyer’s stated goal was to support as many character concepts as possible, from smart barbarians to Muscle Wizards, and the system accomplishes this well.

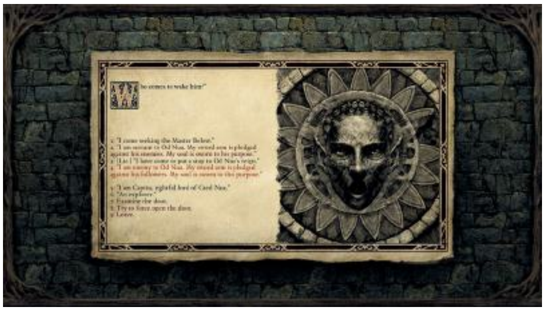
Pillars of Eternity carried heavy expectations. It was supposed to revive a beloved subgenre, and represented a new direction for Obsidian Entertainment, at the time struggling for survival.

Warts and all, it succeeds. It delivers a big, broad, beautiful, and deep game, with massive replayability, a lush, rich world, at the same time familiar and fresh, and gameplay that feels like a natural evolution of the originals it emulates. **PJ**

The *IE Mod* allows you to customise the game to be more like the Infinity Engine games, changing its interface, disabling engagements and more. It also includes some tools to help modders.

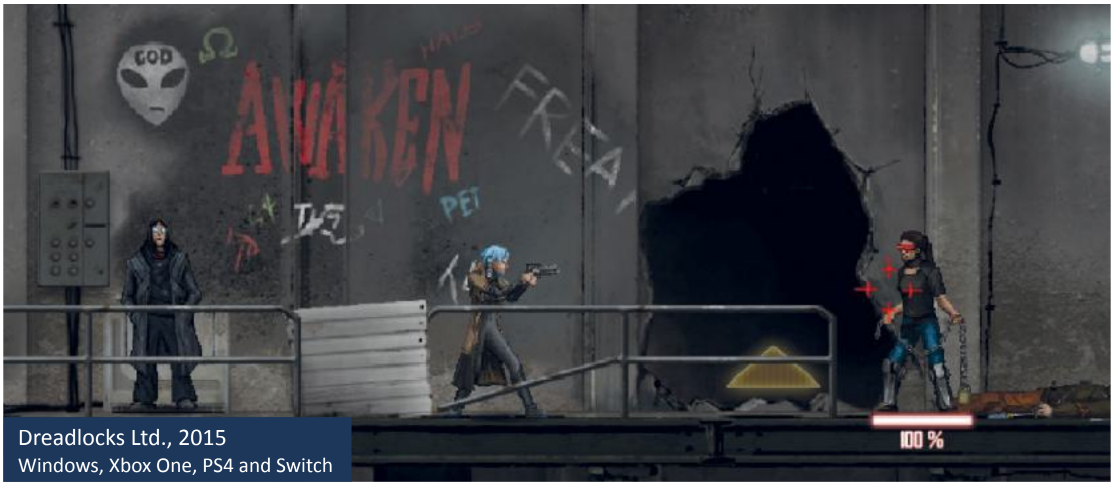


Dialogue is extensive, often presenting multiple choices and skill/attribute/reputation checks, but the story is very linear



While scarcely used, the CYOA-like segments provide interesting role-playing options and are a great addition

Dex



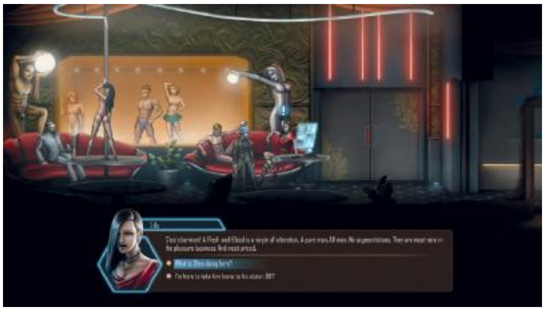
Dreadlocks Ltd., 2015
Windows, Xbox One, PS4 and Switch

Being a cyberpunk fan, the 2010s were a weird period for me. *Deus Ex* made a comeback but nothing else really scratched that particular itch. The only exception was a Czech indie game, *Dex*.

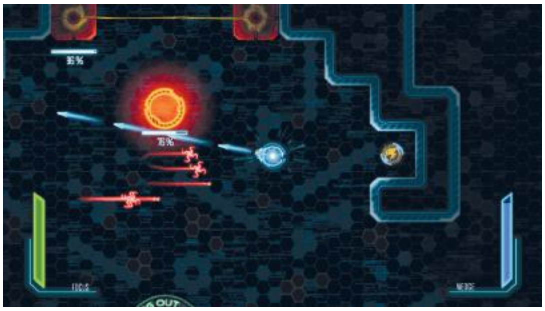
You play as the titular character, Dex, a female punk. With the help of Raycast, an infamous hacker, she escapes attempted kidnapping by a megacorp and finds a crew in order to uncover the reasons behind it.

Dex is a metroidvania RPG at heart. It's set in a city composed of a big variety of interconnected maps, ranging from filthy sewers filled with thugs to the corpo buildings of Highrise district. Everything is portrayed in 2D, with ledges that you can jump on, places you can hide to avoid detection, doors you can unlock by using your lock-picking skills, environmental hazards, etc.

***Dex* first launched to lukewarm reviews, as people had issues with its clunky combat. Dreadlocks then released an Enhanced Version that smoothed out the gameplay.**



The NPCs in *Dex* succeed in giving life to the city, offering stories and quests that give depth to the game's setting



Hacking is done via a shooting mini-game, in which you must explore maze-like stages and survive long enough to retrieve data

This provides the opportunity for several secrets and makes you plan which abilities you will get first. The upgrade system is two-fold: on one hand you have XP you use to level up, which gives you points to spend in skills like endurance, guns, hand-to-hand combat, lock-picking, hacking, charisma, etc. On the other hand, you have access to several types of implant that you can equip, depending on your endurance stat and the size of your wallet. These cybernetics range from stats buffs to abilities like jumping higher or being impervious to gas, which help you reach new areas.

The run-and-gun element of combat is fun, if pretty basic, with only a few weapons and tactics. The same goes for the stealth system, which allows for instant kills if you sneak up on an enemy. You can also go into hacking mode if you want to see if there are hackable things nearby, such as cameras or even enemies. Hacking involves a bullet-hell mini-game, providing an entertaining change of pace from the main gameplay loop. To access network ports, you are thrown into stages in which you have to reach specific goals.

Throughout the city, you'll also find several fully-voiced NPCs who may give you quests that lead to different outcomes and rewards. Despite the obvious difference in budget, *Dex* manages to successfully evoke similar feelings and reactions to *Deus Ex*. It's exciting to learn more about this world, look for secret paths and create skill/implant builds that will enable you to traverse them. The beautifully-drawn set pieces, along with the cool character models, can create really memorable cyberpunk scenes that will stay with you.

Unfortunately, Jan Jirkovský, the lead designer and main force behind the game, passed away in late 2015, so another similar experience won't be coming soon, if ever. That makes it all the more important for you to try out this hidden little gem. **NA**

Sword Coast Legends

n-Space, 2015
Windows, Mac, PS4 and Xbox One

Sword Coast Legends seemed to have a lot going for it. A party-based RPG with single-player and four-player co-op modes, it was released when CRPGs were in a renaissance, adapting the popular *D&D* 5th Edition tabletop rules (with *D&D* itself on the rise). Furthermore, there was a promised Dungeon Master mode that would allow you to create your own scenarios – or recreate classic tabletop ones – and bring your friends along.

In the single-player campaign, you play as a member of the Order of the Burning Dawn, a humble mercenary guild whose origins are much brighter (and darker) than it remembers. Soon, collective nightmares and attacks from the Order of the Gilded Eye push you and your plucky companions into an adventure of survival and discovery that stretches all over the Sword Coast and into the depths of the Underdark.

The game's pedigree and features should have ensured a solid reception if not an outright hit. Instead, the game was doomed by, well, its averageness. Eager CRPG fans criticised the lack of any real choice – the story (which itself feels clichéd) progresses from one location to the next, with no real chance to deviate. Even its dialogue trees ultimately offer nothing beyond different paths to the same foregone conclusion.

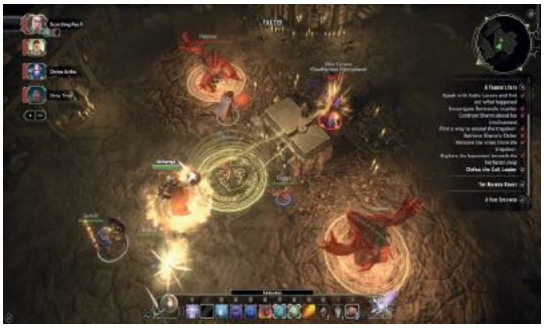
The combat is real-time with pause, and often lacklustre. Frequently, the outcome is based on who gets the big hit in first rather than any strategy on your part. The designers also opted for a cool-down timer mechanic for abilities, which fits the action-RPG feel but seems too far removed from the source game.

For my part, I enjoyed *SCL* well enough for what it was: an inoffensive, action-RPG romp through the Forgotten Realms. It didn't break any new ground, yet its 30-something-hour, single-player campaign was fine for a *D&D*-related diversion from real life.

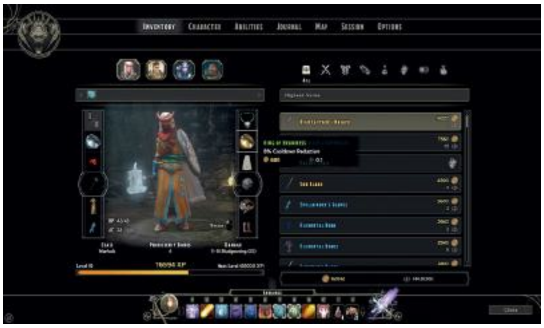
The biggest nail in *SCL*'s coffin, however, was the DM Mode. Players envisioning toolsets similar to those in *Neverwinter Nights 1 & 2* were disappointed by its drawbacks, as creators did not have full control of what they were building – areas can only be procedurally generated, based on a series of player-selected options, while all creatures and loot automatically level-scale – hobbling a mode that could have given *SCL* real legs.

The game still received one free DLC, in the form of the Underdark-centric *Rage of Demons* in 2016, but sales were suspended at the end of 2017, and the multiplayer servers shut down in 2018. *Sword Coast Legends* would be the final release from n-Space, which sadly closed its doors after 22 years of existence. **SP**

The DM mode was very limited and the game died before a modding scene could develop. Still, over 1,600 modules were made by players, which were all lost when the servers shut down.

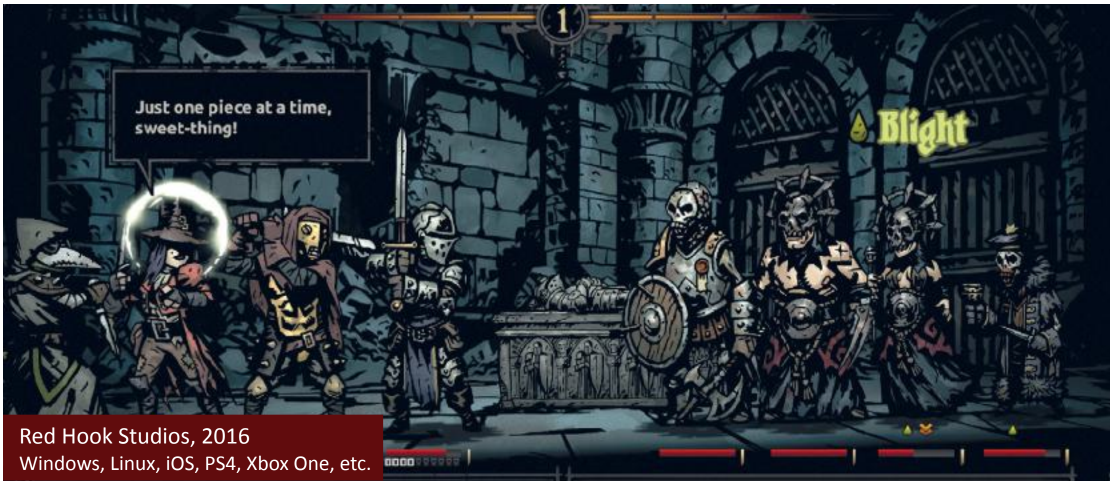


There's no mana or casting limit on abilities and spells: everything is controlled by cool-downs, which makes most battles play in a very similar way



The game offers seven classes and six races from *D&D* 5th edition, with unique sub-races and backgrounds, but the skills, feats and prestige classes were all replaced by skill trees

Darkest Dungeon



Red Hook Studios, 2016
Windows, Linux, iOS, PS4, Xbox One, etc.

***Darkest Dungeon* was crowdfunded on Kickstarter on February 2014, raising $313,337. It went on to sell over 5 million units.**

The online discourse around *Darkest Dungeon* sometimes makes it look like it's a hardcore game made for *those* people — you know the ones, the very edgy, very online people. Especially with all the videos of folk straight-up breaking their computers and screaming in rage while playing it. So, of course, you'd want to stay as far away from the thing as possible. But the thing is, *Darkest Dungeon* is genuinely a very good game, and the fact that it is hard is just one aspect of it.

The basic plot is that you are the heir to a manor from a relative who killed himself after uncovering unspeakable horrors that made him lose his mind. Now you'll have to deal with this whole mess, while your deceased relative provides passive-aggressive narration and scrutinizes your decisions.

Honestly, the plot is not *Darkest Dungeon*'s main focus, so it's not really spotlighted, but that's not to say that the game is purely a mechanical experience, as the emerging narratives that it creates are pretty strong.

The game has a hub called The Hamlet, where you recruit heroes to make expeditions to different parts of the manor. Those heroes come in several different classes, ranging from the Crusader, with his medieval armour and big sword, to the Abomination, a Dr Jekyll/ Mr. Hyde-esque man who turns into a beast and is hated by the other classes, especially the religious ones.

While exploring the dungeons, you will come across traps and obstacles that require special tools to avoid, as well as ambushes, curiosities and treasures

Darkest Dungeon, as the name suggests, is a dungeon crawler. The gameplay loop is basically hiring heroes, sending them to dungeons, fighting turn-based battles and then selling the treasures to heal the heroes who got out alive, upgrade them, improve your hamlet and finance more expeditions. This is repeated until you have heroes strong enough to go to the titular Darkest Dungeon itself and beat the game.

Saying it like that makes it look like it's just hours upon hours of grinding, and in way … yeah, that's kinda it. Yet the game does have several systems in place that create an emerging narrative so you don't feel that way – they won't click for everyone, but that's okay.

Another fair criticism is the game's RNG. You might be faced with situations such as missing four hits in a row and consequently dying. Fans of the game will say that you must plan around that possibility, but it can be very frustrating and make people hate the game.

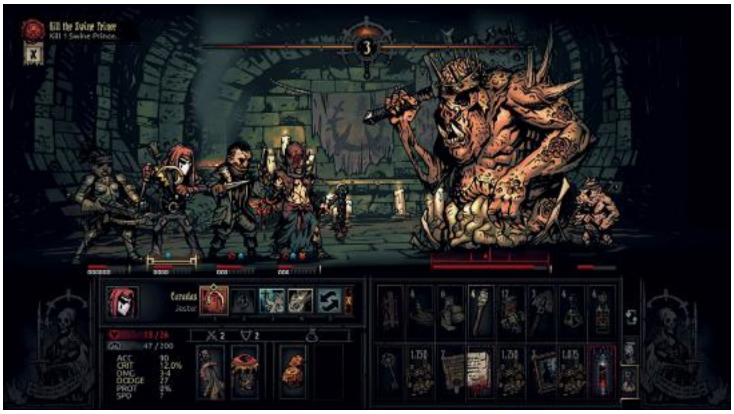
In my case, I really enjoyed how it had me at the edge of my seat most of the time. I was always struggling – dealing with things like trying to keep my heroes sane and alive, or saving enough money to get through the day and buy enough resources for the next expedition.

The way *Darkest Dungeon* cleverly handles risk management is also engaging, using a logic of high risk/ high reward. Your characters are low on HP but there's just one room left to clear, what you do?

If you choose to flee, your characters will get stressed (which will cost time and money to heal), and you will lose the extra rewards from completion – rewards that you might need for some essential stuff.

If you choose to enter the room, your characters might all die permanently in battle, making you lose all the progress and investment made in them. On the other hand, your characters might get positive traits and XP from the battle, and find valuable treasures.

> "It was important that our game felt like high-stakes poker – the player is playing with her best characters, each of whom represents a certain amount of time investment. Permadeath in this context helps increase the tension and player engagement. Other mechanics, like the torchlight, help sell the feeling of dread and pressure – crucial to creating a good horror experience."
>
> *– Chris Bourassa,*
> Darkest Dungeon*'s creative director*



The dungeons are explored with the four heroes marching in line; their positions are very important, as some skills only work if the character is at the back, others only at the front or the middle

There's no right way to go about it; the game wants you to make your decisions while also keeping you aware of the consequences at all times. *Darkest Dungeon* requires much of its player, weighting every choice, from party composition to resource management and risk assessment. When a hero dies, you will know if it was your fault – if you were the one who disposed of vital provisions to make room for more gold. And it auto-saves frequently, so there's no turning back.

The game also has some of the best representations of cosmic horror I've ever seen. This isn't just an aesthetic choice or buzzword, but a crucial aspect of its design. The game captures the profound anguish and anxiety of Lovecraft's stories: your heroes will break down while trying to make sense of the horrible and inexplicable things that dwell in the dungeons; they'll turn to their worst sides when collapsing under the pressure.

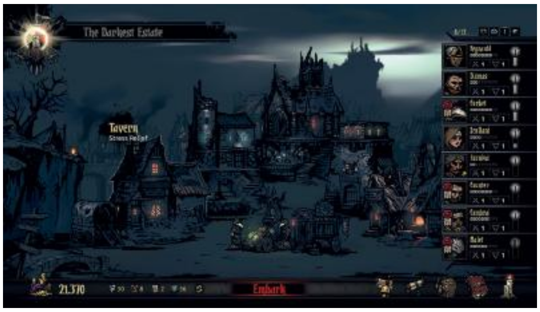
This is perfectly encapsulated in the stress meter, probably the coolest mechanic here. As they are faced with adversity, the heroes will build up stress. So, for instance: you didn't buy enough torches so they're all in the dark; you didn't buy enough food so now they're all starving; one of the heroes died; one of the heroes said something offensive to the others; an enemy landed a critical hit; they all saw a horrible monster; they were forced to flee from combat, etc.

If you don't take proper care, the stress bar will fill and the hero will go through a stress check. The outcome might be a positive or, as it is most of the time, a negative trait that will last through the entire dungeon. Their various experiences in dungeons will also affect the hero's personality, so that they gain positive or negative quirks that last beyond the dungeons. If the stress meter of a hero fills up twice in a row, it's over – they'll have a heart attack and die permanently.

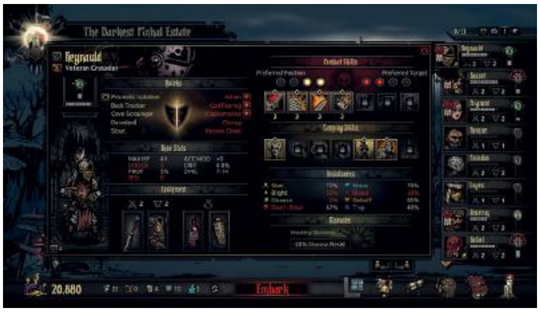
In the end, what made me love *Darkest Dungeon* the most was the way it understands what horror is really about, and uses that to create immersive, emergent narratives. Horror stories are not just about showing through metaphors how messed up our reality is and how meaningless we are when facing the absurdity of this unbending, apathetic universe. In reality, the best horror stories are about showing the little flicker of light that makes it all worth it.

Darkest Dungeon is about the tolls of adventuring, of facing nightmares and ancient Gods to make the world a better place. Seeing how, even after all they've been through – all the dread and struggle – the heroes will try and cheer each other on at the campfire, just so they can bear to go through more horror together, I can't help but give that little side-smile and feel a little better too. **PB**

***Darkest Dungeon* has several mods that add new classes or change the heroes' appearance. There are also many re-balance mods, but be aware: these can radically change the intended experience.**

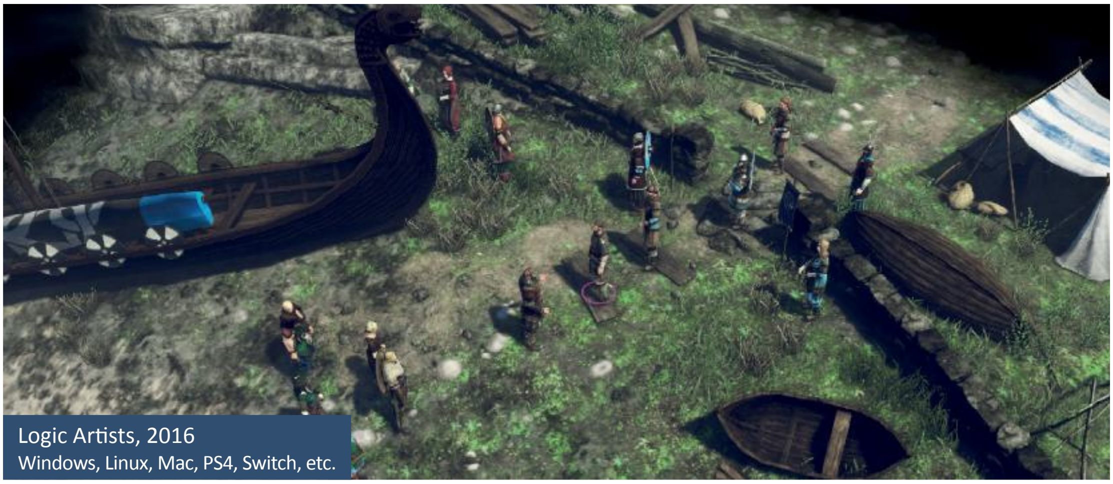


The hamlet is your base, with upgrades offering more options when hiring, equipping, training and healing heroes



The game offers 18 hero classes with all DLCs, and each hero you hire also comes with randomised stats, quirks and skills

Expeditions: Viking



Logic Artists, 2016
Windows, Linux, Mac, PS4, Switch, etc.

Logic Artists' first game, *Expeditions: Conquistador* (2013), was a *Heroes of Might & Magic* clone with quests and some role-playing choices. Its sequel, *Expeditions: Viking*, is a fully-fledged RPG. The *HoMM*-like world map was replaced by one similar to *Fallout 1*'s, and character development is deeper, offering more options both during combat and outside it.

In *Viking* you're the dying Jarl's son. You'll first have to pay your crown in blood, then secure the future of your clan by seeking allies, dealing with enemies and gathering riches. Quests are well designed, respecting the setting and your status as Jarl. Some will have lasting consequences: when dealing with treasonous clansmen you'll have the option to be merciful, to spare only the women, to banish them or to just kill everyone. Later, if their farm is empty, you can offer it to someone else.

The turn-based combat is highly tactical – you'll need to make extensive use of cover, buffs and debuffs, doing everything to control the battlefield: block archers, ambush and stun enemies, use skills against their tanks, avoid their traps then deploy your own, etc. Downed allies might get wounded and suffer injuries, which act as ongoing debuffs until fully healed.

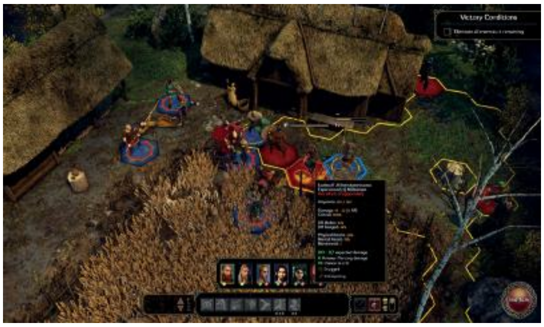
Viking also offers several management layers. First, build your homestead, which requires resources. You can find these while exploring or during camping, trade for them, or get them through quest rewards. You'll also have to manage food and camping duties.

On top of this, there's a morale mechanic: each companion has personality traits that define how they react to your choices. So, violent dialogue options and quest resolutions can boost aggressive followers' morale while hindering the peaceful ones, and so on. You can hire custom mercs to mitigate this, but you don't want to miss out on the game's excellent companions – their dialogue and banter are second only to those of *Wizardry 8*.

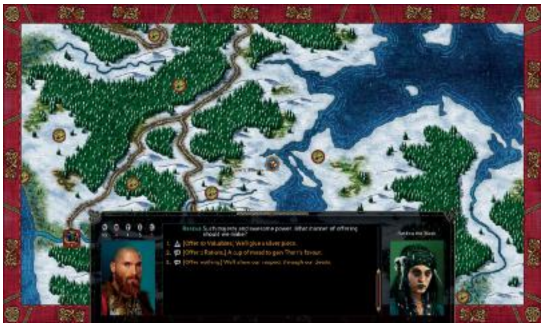
Sadly, not everything is an upgrade. *Conquistador*'s combat engine was fluid, with a simple UI and excellent enemy AI. *Viking*'s battles often stutter or glitch, and the AI outside scripted battles has erratic behaviour. There are also many loading screens, especially in towns, and a memory leak that constantly slows them down.

In short, *Expeditions: Viking* is a good, almost great turn- and party-based RPG with the management mechanics done right. It offers an interesting setting, good character development and quest design, and great combat. If Logic Artists' next game, *Expeditions: Rome*, manages to fix *Viking*'s shortcomings, they might earn a spot next to legendary RPG developers like SSI, Sir-tech and New World Computing. **DAR**

The third game in the series, *Expeditions: Rome*, was released in January 2022 to positive reviews. However, Logic Artists has since split into two studios, Campfire Cabal and Dynasty Studios.

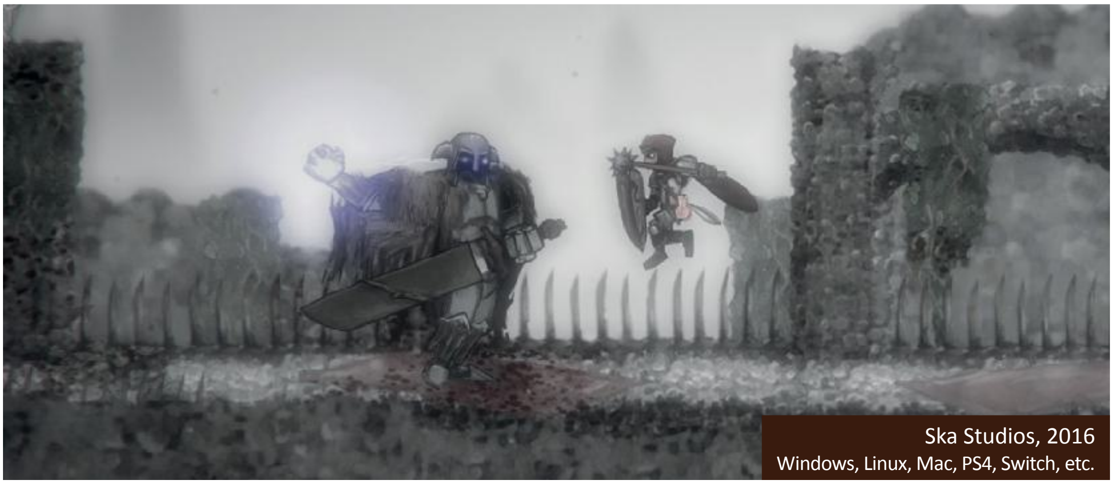


Viking offers plenty of role-playing options: you can go raiding villages and monasteries, or help them and establish alliances and trade routes



When travelling on foot, you will have to find places to camp, manage camping duties and supplies, and treat the wounded; you might also come across special events

Salt and Sanctuary



Ska Studios, 2016
Windows, Linux, Mac, PS4, Switch, etc.

In recent years, side-scrolling "*Souls*-like" games have been rife, but the one that started it all was *Salt and Sanctuary*. Immediately upon launching the game, you'll see the *Dark Souls* inspiration. The dark mood of its decaying world, very few NPCs to talk to, similar death mechanics, a fatigue system, the way armour works, and the difficulty of combat.

As in the *Souls* games, you begin by picking your character's archetype class, race and gender. These are just starting points, as later on the player can customise their character by spending points on a large skill tree, accessing a wide variety of playstyles. The quantity of items and equipment adds further to your freedom in developing your character, one of *Salt and Sanctuary*'s stronger points. Do you want to be an agile, roguish character, a mage, or a bulky knight? You can be one of those, or you can mix and match. Different bosses require different tactics, but all enemies are dangerous, as the player must dodge attacks and jump around platforms while keeping track of their stamina.

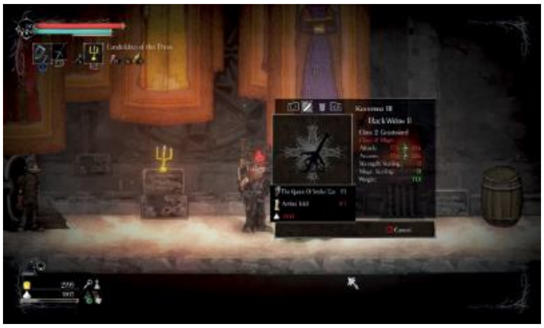
The game's death mechanic is also similar to that in the *Souls* series. When you die – and you will die a lot – your character respawns at the closest sanctuary. Blacksmiths, merchants, magic teachers, and other people inhabit these places, offering their services. One such NPC will allow you to play the game in two-player local co-op. I experienced this, and while things did get hectic, and easier than playing alone, it was still fun. Certain sanctuaries are also tied to factions, each offering unique bonuses and advantages.

As for the metroidvania genre inspirations, your character will unlock new movement abilities that allow access to new areas while also making it worthwhile to revisit previous locations. These abilities can be anything from wall or double jumping to exploring some areas while being upside down.

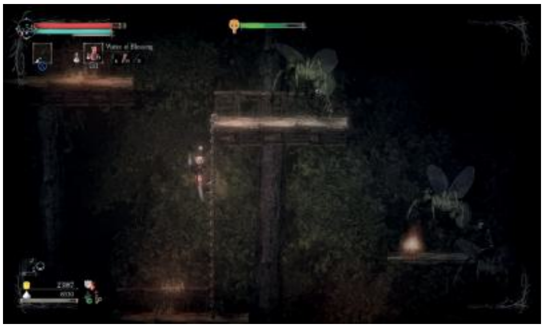
The level design is non-linear, and impressive in general, with many secrets to be found behind hidden walls, pits or difficult platforming sections. In some parts, precise platforming is the focus, while in others looking out for environmental traps is more important.

What makes *Salt and Sanctuary* so good is how the developer managed to mix its two inspirations into an excellent package. It offers a complete action-RPG experience, with solid exploration, challenging but fun combat, a dark and bleak world, and platforming that can be finicky, but is still solid enough. This excellent mix of 2D *Souls*-like combat and metroidvania-style exploration set the standard for this new sub-genre. Quite a feat for a husband-and-wife project. **RON**

Ska Studios' first game was 2007's *The Dishwasher: Dead Samurai*, developed by James Silva. For *Salt and Sanctuary*, his wife Michelle joined in.

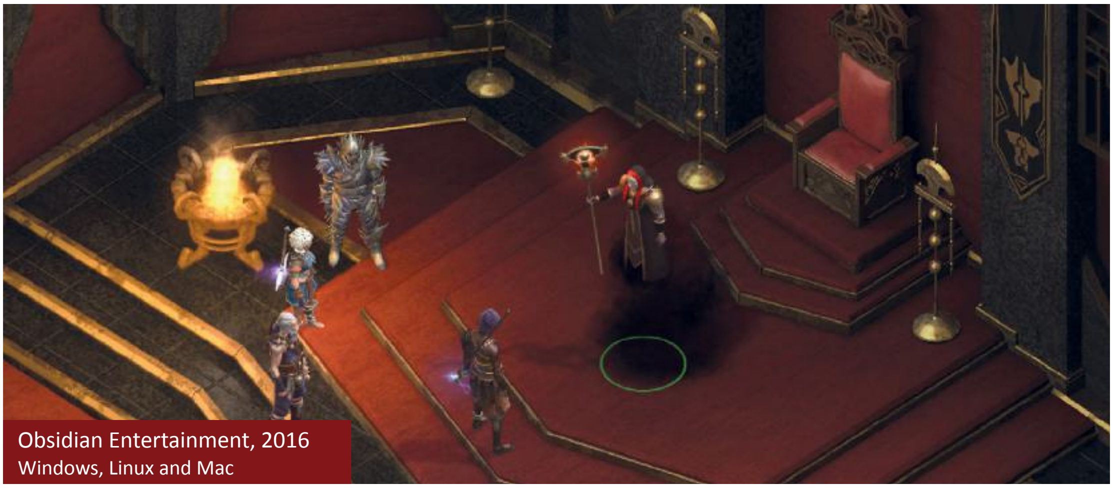


Many elements of *Salt and Sanctuary* are directly taken from the Souls games, such as crafting unique items from the body parts of defeated bosses



Levels are often vertical, placing enemies in sneaky positions; you'll have to jump, climb and dodge your way to them

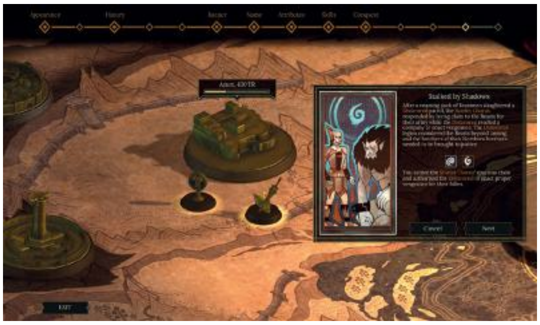
Tyranny



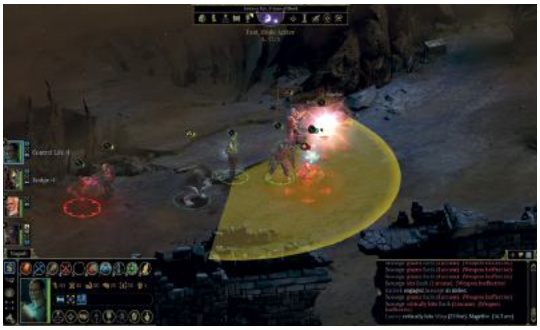
Obsidian Entertainment, 2016
Windows, Linux and Mac

Evil has won in this fantasy bronze age game, which iterates upon the esteemed formula of Infinity Engine RPGs. The empire of Kyros has all but conquered the known world and the player serves as one of its Fatebinders, a mix of a dozen different roles from diplomat to assassin to general to judge to adventurer.

The premise represents a clear desire to explore more complex scenarios than those in most fantasy games, but different themes require different gameplay experiences to fully shine. During the past-shaping text introduction, the protagonist executes feats that paint them as a living legend. But afterwards, the game reveals its core gameplay of looting crates, getting companions and killing scores of foes.



Tyranny begins with a CYOA segment in which you shape your character's past, performing feats worthy of a living legend



Combat is RTwP, similar to that of *Pillars of Eternity*, but with only four party members and a heavy focus on cooldown-based abilities

With such an intro, you might expect to solve issues related to logistics, diplomacy or battlefields but instead the core of the game is the usual low-level RPG tropes most have come to expect.

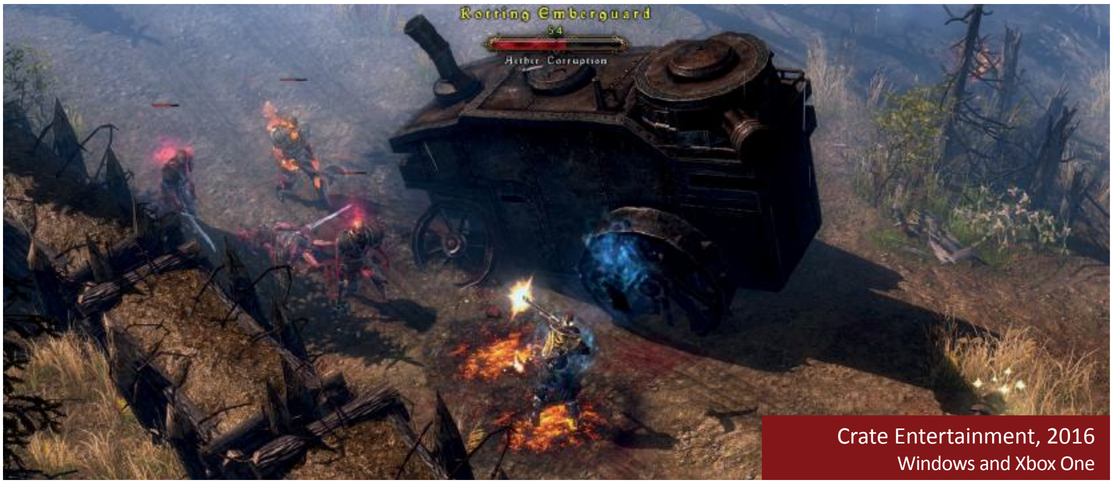
The more interesting aspects of being an occupying force are sparse, but there are moments that shine, such as the trial of one of your peers who killed soldiers engaging in sexual assault. The player can ignore this out of loyalty, condemn them or help them wiggle out via legal loopholes. This moment is just a bog-standard dialogue tree at its heart, but it showcases the type of situation that should have defined *Tyranny.*

This is all the more disappointing since the reputation system is worthy of praise. It tracks multiple factions and individuals with all kinds of modifiers as rewards. There are impactful choices to make here, no doubt; unfortunately the writing is not up to snuff and does not make them feel meaningful. The vast majority of the time, you engage with badass fantasy stereotypes, which in turn paints over the more uncomfortable civilian situations relating to mass subjugation that naturally arise from the premise of *Tyranny.*

What is left is a game with a pitifully small enemy variety and whose battles become aggressively boring due to the large health pool of enemies and the repetitive nature of the cool-down-based abilities. And yet again, the potential is there: the spellcasting system is actually novel; modular spells are created via runes the player finds throughout the game; but encounters designed to make this system shine just aren't there.

In the end, Infinity Engine games were, generally, fantasy adventures done well. In comparison, *Tyranny* is a game of conquest and political intriguing done badly. No number of peripheral changes will placate the discord between the creative vision behind the Fatebinder role and the loot-and-kill type of the core gameplay. **LL**

Grim Dawn



Crate Entertainment, 2016
Windows and Xbox One

The early 2010s saw a fierce battle for the crown of best *Diablo* successor – *Diablo III* (2012) wanted to modernise the formula, *Path of Exile* (2013) went for hardcore players, and *Torchlight II* (2012) offered a lighthearted approach. *Grim Dawn*'s goal was to polish the classic *Diablo II* experience.

The game was created by Crate Entertainment, a team of former Iron Lore developers that licensed the engine of their previous title, *Titan Quest*. They went around raising funds, then launched a Kickstarter campaign in 2012. An alpha version of the game was released to backers in 2013, then the studio kept working on and polishing it until the 2016 full release.

As a whole, *Grim Dawn* is very similar to *Titan Quest*, with similar visuals, a non-randomised world map, a slower and very "crunchy" combat experience, and a class system that lets you combine two different skill trees (from a total of nine with the expansions).

Some key improvements were added – the world now has several secrets, side-quests and hidden bosses for players to find, some requiring rare drops to be accessed. There are factions you can side with to perform quests to unlock new items, special dungeons where you cannot revive, and a Devotion system that adds an extra layer to late-game character progression.

While *GD* won't impress anyone with its visuals, the experience was polished by years of community feedback. For example, it still has three difficulties that must be played in order, but advanced players can now toggle a Veteran option that makes the first difficulty more challenging, and can later skip to the final difficulty by acquiring a special in-game item.

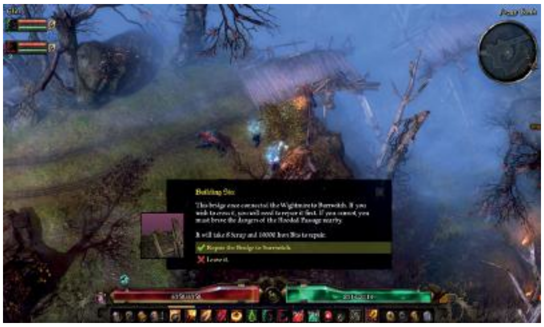
Another strength of *GD* is its moddability. As with *Titan Quest*, several mods exist to add new classes, reduce grinding, change the UI, increase monster spawn, etc. There's even a full remake of *Diablo II*!

Gameplay-wise, *GD* is a far superior sequel to *TQ*. Content-wise, however, it's a mixed bag. The Victorian setting combines rural villages, wild west gangs, World War I trenches and Lovecraftian horrors, but few of the enemies stand out or have unique mechanics, a step back from the mythological beings of *Titan Quest*.

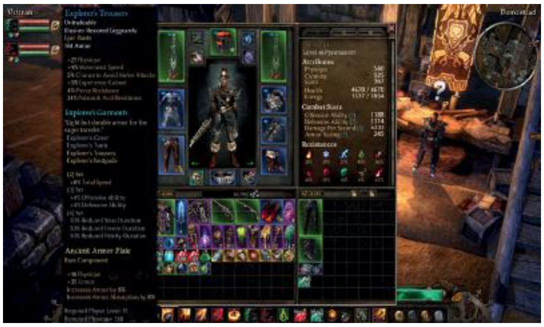
This was much improved in the expansions, which added more unique creatures and environments: *Ashes of Malmouth* completed the main storyline; *Forgotten Gods* added a side-adventure full of new creatures; and *Crucible* is an arena for the most hardcore of players.

The full *Grim Dawn* package doesn't break any new ground but, as promised, delivers a solid and polished game that any *Diablo II* fan will enjoy. **FE**

***Grim Dawn's* Kickstarter launched in April 2012, asking for $280,000 and raising $537,515.**



Secret areas and side-paths are a welcome addition to the genre, giving a more open-world feel and allowing players to choose the order in which they want to explore



Grim Dawn's loot system is impressive: besides the usual tiered items and sets there are also crafting, augments and items exclusive to certain bosses

NieR: Automata

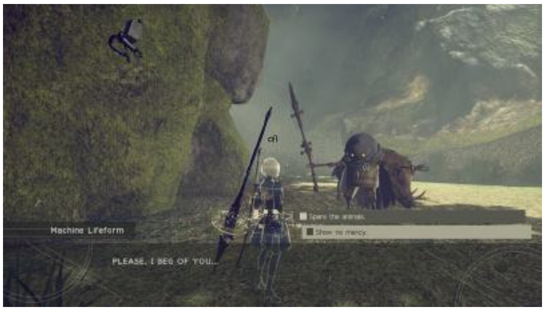
PlatinumGames, 2017
Windows, PS4 and Xbox One

NieR: Automata broke videogames for me. After I finished it – after I really finished it, exploring the final ending and its secrets – I felt that I was done with games. I looked over the shelves holding my videogame collection and felt nothing else could come close.

***NieR: Automata* was a surprise hit, selling over six million units and spawning several side-products such as novels, manga, figures, stage plays and several CDs with rearrangements and live renditions of its iconic music.**

NieR: Automata is an action RPG. But it also exists within the subset of "games as philosophy". That is, not necessarily a game about philosophy, or a game teaching or introducing you to philosophy, but a game that tries to get the player to experience philosophical concepts through its gameplay structure rather than its narrative. Of course, it is a Japanese game, so the delivery vehicle for these concepts is a story about a scantily clad female android destroying killer robots with katana combos.

To truly understand the lineage of this concept and weird mashup, we need to go back to Japan in the mid-'90s and the launch of the anime *Neon Genesis Evangelion*. *Evangelion* combined futuristic mecha fighting giant kaiju with highfalutin philosophical and religious language. The show impacted Japanese pop culture in a way that would bend its trajectory for years to come, inspiring a generation of game creators to similarly co-opt philosophical and religious trappings into their game worlds and narratives.


Machine Lifeform
PLEASE, I BEG OF YOU...

NieR: Automata has 26 different endings; some require multiple playthroughs to reach, while others are achieved by simple decisions that diverge from the main story

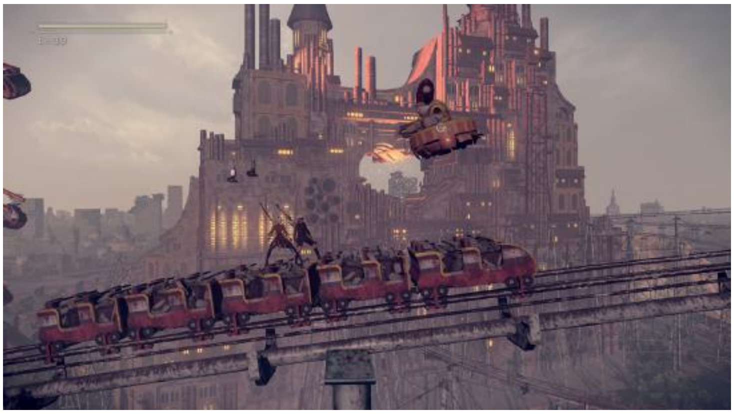
Initially, games like *Xenogears* (1998) and *Xenosaga* (2002) mostly explored such concepts verbally and kept to more traditional gameplay and structure. More recent games (like the original *NieR* or later entries in the *Persona* series) started dipping their toes into weaving philosophy into game design. This transition from philosophically-charged anime to game is key.

The philosopher Alan Watts uses a curious language trick to help bridge the concepts of eastern and western religions. He starts with the word "Maya", used by eastern religions to represent the illusory nature of the world; he translates it roughly as "illusion", and then points out that illusion has roots in the Latin "ludens" meaning "play". Through this vision of "reality/life/existence as play", the emergence of games like *NieR: Automata* starts to make sense.

You can read about philosophy in a book and envision the concepts in the theatre of your mind, or you can watch a movie about characters embodying philosophical principles, but you are still a spectator. Games are unique in the way that they mimic real life. They let you interact with a world and reality that is not your own but feels closer to it than anything you can experience without the use of hallucinogenic substances.

At first glance, *NieR: Automata* is a game about two androids, 2B and 9S, fighting robots in a post-apocalyptic world to protect mankind. Of course, the game does the whole *Evangelion/Xenosaga* thing of dropping religious and philosophical babble on you at every turn, but that's little more than an aesthetic layer, something meant to prime a philosophical frame of mind. The real meat is many layers deep and only exposes itself on repeat playthroughs.

> "I've always thought about what it means to have an ending to a game. When you really think about it, it doesn't really matter where a game ends. Ultimately, if the player is satisfied with stopping at a particular point, it doesn't matter if it's where the creator intended things to end or not … and so that's where the idea of having so many endings came about."
>
> *– Yoko Taro,*
> NieR: Automata*'s Director*



Automata's combat is easy to learn, with just light and heavy attack types, but has nuances that make it deep and hard to master, such as combos, aerial combos, dodging, multiple weapon sets and a pod that shoots while you fight

The game twists conventions by making you think that you are simply retreading the same game from a slightly different point of view. What it is doing is leading you into a path that, if you manage to follow successfully – and many won't – will break with game design convention in ways that are only eclipsed by *Castlevania: Symphony of the Night* (1997).

But while in that game, the revelation was "merely" structural, saving the latter half of the game and real ending as a reward for the most completionist and attentive players, *NieR: Automata* goes one step beyond, hiding its closing act behind not a challenging obstacle, but simple misdirection. You don't have to do anything complicated to discover the game's closing act; you just have to play past the point at which most people will think there is nothing else to see.

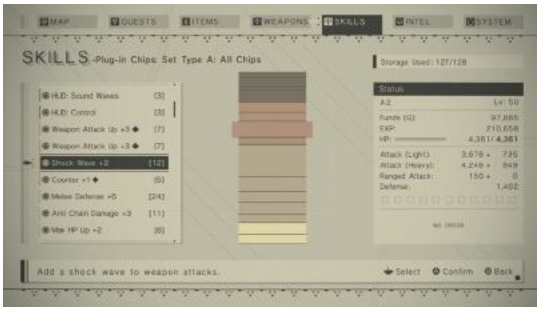
Along the way, the game will have woven narrative and structure – through exploration and gameplay loops – to underscore concepts such as the perils of a generation still following the will of long-gone ancestors just because that's the way it has always been, or the random and quasi-magical way life forms and sometimes the fossilized remains of an ancient structure are what keeps new ideas and people from springing forth.

NieR: Automata conveys all of this while remaining engaging to play. There are plenty of weapons with combos and special attacks to unlock; an interesting slot-based upgrade mechanism; and occasional side-scrolling shooter segments to shake things up. There's even the traditional Platinum touch of a rewarding dodge-and-counter mechanic similar to *Bayonetta*'s, but never at the cost of making it feel too much of an action game instead of an action RPG.

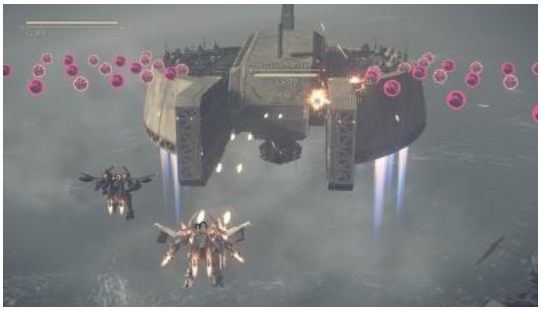
Automata celebrates and helps players experience the wisdom of the ages – culminating with the ultimate expression of the endpoint of the Christian mythos, in a way that has never been captured before and probably won't be replicated for years to come (see sidebar) – while simultaneously pointing out that the only real way forward is to know when to leave these frameworks behind and forge something anew.

Yes, it rarely achieves this with much in the way of grace and elegance. Just as its machine lifeforms play at being human (note the significance of the word) without even realising that this is the path to one day achieving something akin to humanity, so is *NieR: Automata* playing, sometimes awkwardly so, at being philosophy. That it occasionally stumbles into helping the player gain a new level of understanding into the reality of the western mythos is nothing short of extraordinary. **LM**.

SPOILER: *Automata*'s final section asks you to accept help from players who sacrificed their save data to help others. It then asks if you want to do the same; your sacrifice will enable others to finish the game, in a modern re-enactment of the most known story in Western mythos.


MAP
QUESTS
ITEMS
WEAPONS
SKILLS
INTEL
SYSTEM
SKILLS -Plug-in Chips: Set Type A: All Chips
Storage Used: 127/128
HUD: Sound Waves (3)
HUD: Control (3)
Weapon Attack Up +3 (7)
Weapon Attack Up +3 (7)
Shock Wave +2 (12)
Counter +1 (6)
Melee Defense +6 (24)
Anti Chain Damage +3 (11)
Max HP Up +2 (8)
Status
A2
Lv: 50
Funds (G): 97,885
EXP: 210,658
HP: 4,361/4,361
Attack (Light): 3,676 + 735
Attack (Heavy): 4,248 + 849
Ranged Attack: 150 + 0
Defense: 1,402
Add a shock wave to weapon attacks.
Select
Confirm
Back

Upgrades and skills are chips that use up the android's memory; to free space for more chips, you can disable things like the UI



NieR: Automata has several shoot-'em-up sections during its story, often seamlessly mixing them with the action-RPG combat

Divinity: Original Sin 2

Larian Studios, 2017
Windows, Mac, PS4, Xbox One and Switch

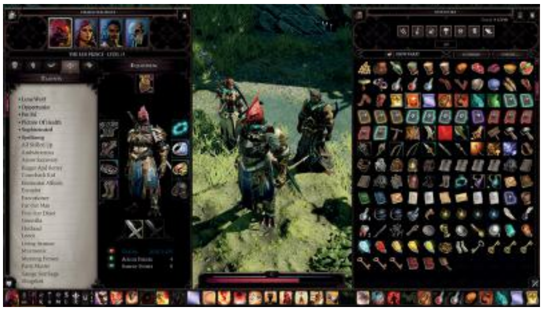
My first attempt at playing *Divinity: Original Sin 2* lasted only a few hours. I made a character, walked around the game's first area and left without feeling much drive to continue. It all felt very similar to the first *Original Sin*; I didn't understand why so many people were loving it.

Divinity: Original Sin 2 **was also crowdfunded on Kickstarter. The campaign launched in August 2015 and raised $2,032,434.**

The second time I played it, my playthrough lasted over 100 hours and is still one of the best game experiences I ever had. The difference is that this time I had a group of three friends playing with me.

This is not merely a case of "everything is better with friends". *Divinity:OS1* had been built for co-op play, but in a traditional way – you had one story, one goal, and two characters working towards it. Sure, it allowed for clever tricks like one player distracting an NPC while another sneaks past it, but that was about it. The whole thing didn't feel that much different from playing something like *Borderlands* in co-op. For *D:OS2*, Larian went back to the source and learned the best tricks for a fun tabletop RPG session.

They expanded multiplayer to four players and added six pre-made "origin stories" for you to choose from – exiled prince, crestfallen paladin, escaped slave, failed rebel, musician possessed by a demon, and millennia-old undead. You can pick the origins while still customising your class, appearance and skills.



D:OS2 has a huge quantity of items and equipment to collect, but the steep level-scaling of items leaves crafting underpowered and makes even legendary gear become obsolete rather quickly

If you play by yourself, the other origin stories will appear as companions that can join your party. Since each was designed as a possible main character, they have complex storylines, strong personalities and their own goals – they will interrupt you, ask for things, get angry and possibly leave, depending on your choices.

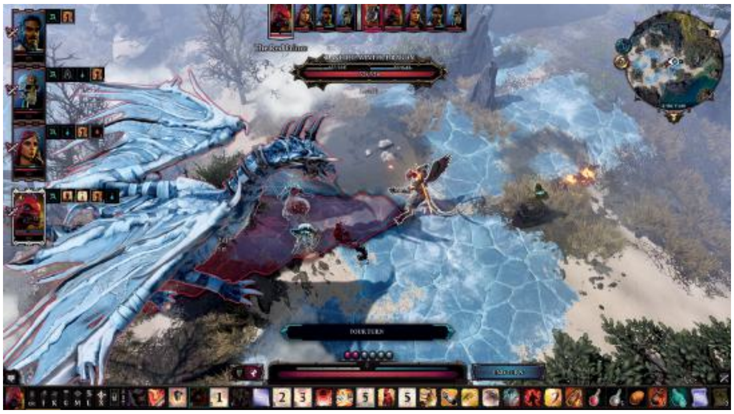
RPG companions with agency have been done before, but multiplayer takes it to a whole new level – a human player behind each of these characters. If you meet a chained dragon, one player might want to kill and loot it, another demands its release and a third wants to try a unique dialogue option he has as a lizard.

During development, the Larian team talked a lot about "competitive questing", with one player sabotaging another. It's an interesting idea for a 10-minute game like *Among Us*, but doesn't make sense in a 100+ hour RPG. In the final game, what emerged was something more nuanced. There's little incentive to ruin quests; conflict naturally arises from the many ways to complete a quest, the moral choices involved and the different benefits of each outcome.

Larian acts like a clever game master and treats each player individually. There are key story moments in which each player will be taken to a separate area and have dialogues no other player can hear, hinting that only one player can truly "win". Some players will try to find a solution, others will start making plans.

The moment-to-moment gameplay also pushes for conflict. Say you go back to town to buy a new sword while the rest of the group is stuck in a puzzle – suddenly, a character approaches you and tells a secret or presents a quick quest. You can call your friends to hear it, or just keep it to yourself and try to solve it – maybe getting yourself into trouble. This flexibility is even present on the UI itself – you can choose to open your inventory to other players or keep it secret.

> "It is a difficult balancing act. People that only play in single-player want to have a really serious, immersive storyline, whereas if you are playing in multiplayer you want to goof around. Maybe we were a bit too goofy in the first one, so we tried to fix that in this one. We wanted to have more narrative weight and consistency, but we still wanted you to be able to fool around, laugh with your friends and do crazy shit."
>
> *– Swen Vincke,*
> Divinity: Original Sin 2*'s Director*



The developers tried to stop the abuse of status effects in *D:OS1* by adding an armour system and other tweaks, but the result is a system that's less interesting than in the original; luckily, it can be modded

All this finally provides the personality and charm that the first *Divinity: Original Sin* sorely lacked, while still offering the same degree of freedom. You still can solve all quests in multiple ways, move objects around, combine spells and elements, teleport enemies, steal, sneak around, etc. – it's a fantastic RPG playground.

Dialogues now react to your character's origins and traits, so there are a lot of unique dialogue options for your lizard, dwarf, scholar, hero, etc. On the other hand, the new persuasion system falls into the common trap of offering the best solution to most quests, often suppressing thought and role-play.

The elephant in the room is the armour system. All characters have two armour types: physical and magical. In order to damage someone with magic, you must first deal enough magical damage to destroy their magic armour. However, destroying the magic armour will not affect the physical armour. As such, this system actively punishes a diverse group, pushing you to focus entirely on magical or physical damage.

Overall, the balance of the game is quite lacking – too easy on the normal difficulties, but absolutely brutal in Tactical Mode, without an in-between or the option to increase it mid-game. My group started on Classic and everything became so easy in the second act that we hacked the save files to increase the difficulty.

While it's sad that the 2018 *Definitive Edition* did not fix these issues, it does offer modding tools that allow players to change the game's balance, armour system, camera, etc. Moreover, there's a Game Master mode in which you can prepare and play new adventures with friends, then export them for other players.

Larian was founded in 1996; they're one of the oldest independent studios around. *Divinity: Original Sin 2* is their victory – it shows their rise from a beloved oddball studio to the leaders of a new generation. *D:OS2* quickly sold over a million copies, established a new standard for party-based and multiplayer CRPGs and even convinced developers like Obsidian to embrace turn-based combat. Hats off to them. **FE**

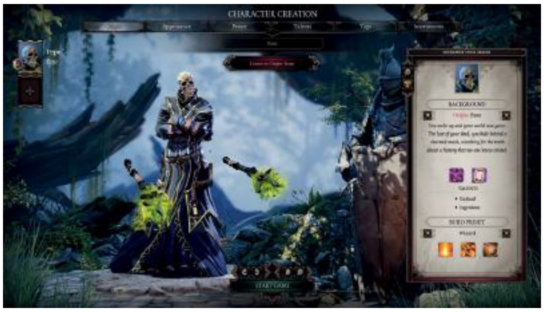
In 2018 Larian released the *Definitive Edition*, reworking the final act and some story lines, as well as adding performance upgrades and console ports.

Mods:

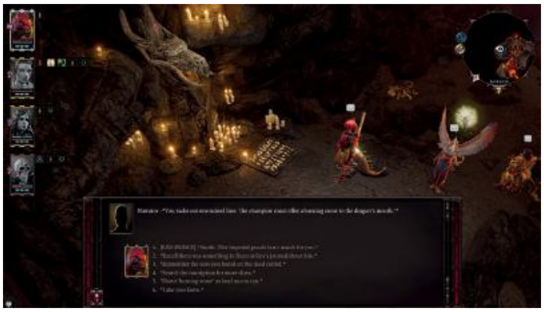
Divinity Unleashed: A fantastic mod pack that fixes balance issues with the game, from the armour system to stunlocks, while also offering more build options.

Epic Encounters: Origins: Completely changes the game's combat, adding an entirely new character system. Recommended for hardcore players and min-maxers.

Odinblade's Class Mods: A group of 12 different mods that revamps weak classes like Necromancers and also add new ones, like Specter and Assassin.

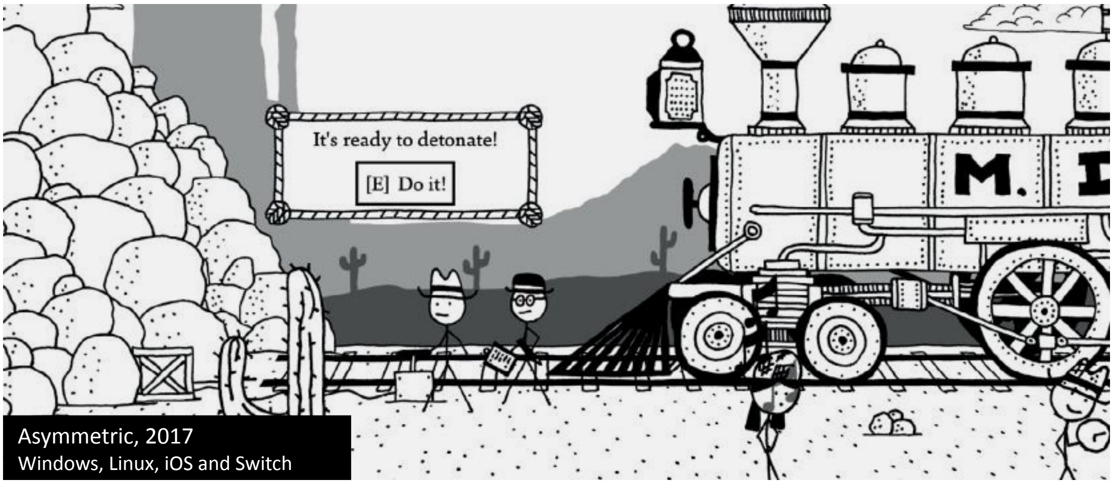


While you can still create a blank-slate character, the nine origin stories provide a lot of personality without sacrificing customisation



As in the first game, *D:OS2* features a narrator who gives flavour to dialogues, now aided by a much stronger cast of characters

West of Loathing


It's ready to detonate!
[E] Do it!
M. I

Asymmetric, 2017
Windows, Linux, iOS and Switch

It all began as a joke – Zack "Jick" Johnson was tired of seeing MMORPGs with serious plots and realistic graphics, so he thought it would be funny if he made one that had stick figures and a silly plot. In a single week he created *Kingdom of Loathing*, a free-to-play browser game released in 2003.

Featuring classes such as Seal Clubber, Accordion Thief and Pastamancer, its players would fight against bizarre enemies – tall dwarves, bread golems, vampire ducks – and take on hilarious parodies of MMO quests, such as doing a grammar test before being allowed to use the chat. Mostly text-based, *KoL* took inspiration from the 1989 BBS game *Legend of the Red Dragon*. Players have a limited number of actions per day, and compete against each other for the highest scores and rarest items. The game was a surprise hit, so Johnson formed Asymmetric Publications to manage and expand it, eventually reaching over 150,000 active players in 2008 (the game is still active as of 2021).

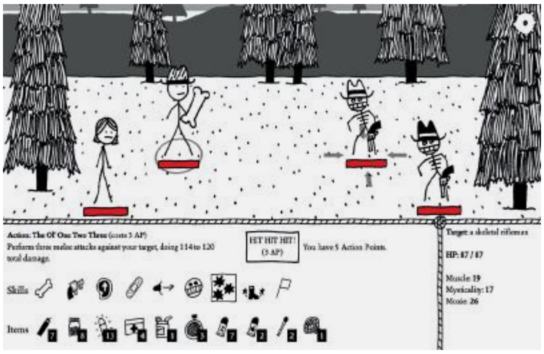
If *Kingdom of Loathing* was a parody of 2000s MMORPGs, *West of Loathing* is a parody of modern RPGs. You start by choosing one of three classes – Cow Puncher, Beanslinger or Snake Oiler – then leave your family's farm in search of adventure.

The game has a very open structure, being split into three regions, each with a main quest to solve. So you wander around, encountering all sorts of absurd situations – a ghost town obsessed with bureaucracy, a farm overrun by hell-cows, a hat-wearing gang hidden inside a hat shop – with many being interconnected and leading to tips on how to solve the main quest.

Although it's a parody, *West of Loathing* offers more freedom than most RPGs. Quests usually have multiple solutions, making use of your items, stats or puzzle-solving skills. For example, you can fight a Yeast Beast that is destroying a brewery, or dissolve it with ethanol. Combat is sparse, mostly in random encounters while travelling or as a way to brute-force a section that you can't figure out otherwise.

This is good news, since combat is *WoL*'s weakest aspect. It's quick, but also overly simple, and any idea of balance is abandoned so the game can constantly give you funny new items, equipment and abilities to use.

West of Loathing delivers an experience that's scarce in RPGs – it is extremely funny and sharply written, offers an impressive degree of player freedom, and it does all this without ever taking itself too seriously or overstaying its welcome. It's rare to see such a deep understanding of both humour and RPG design. **FE**

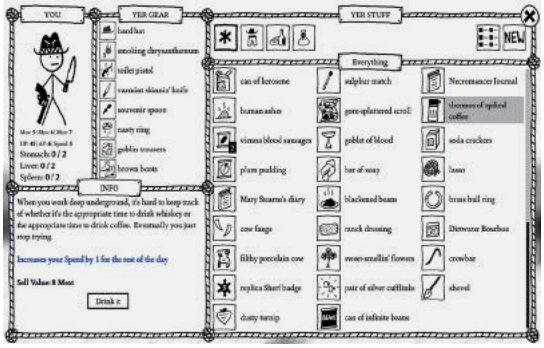

HIT HIT HIT! (3 AP)
Skills
Items
7
8
13
4
1
3
7
2
2
1

Action: The Ol' One Two Three (costs 3 AP)
Perform three melee attacks against your target, doing 114 to 120 total damage.

You have 5 Action Points.

Target: a skeletal rifleman
HP: 87 / 87
Muscle: 19
Mysticality: 17
Moxie: 26

You can choose one companion to help you in the turn-based battles, but combat isn't the focus of the game and serves more as a tool for delivering jokes or side-stepping puzzles


YOU
YER GEAR
YER STUFF
NEW
Everything
INFO
hard hat
smoking chrysanthemum
toilet pistol
varmint skinnin' knife
souvenir spoon
nasty ring
goblin trousers
brown boots
can of kerosene
human ashes
vienna blood sausages
plum pudding
Mary Stearns's diary
cow fangs
filthy porcelain cow
replica Sheriff badge
dusty turnip
sulphur match
gore-splattered scroll
goblet of blood
bar of soap
blackened beans
ranch dressing
sweet-smellin' flowers
pair of silver cufflinks
can of infinite beans
Necromancer Journal
thermos of spiked coffee
soda crackers
lasso
brass bull ring
Dirtwater Bourbon
crowbar
shovel
Drink it

Stomach: 0 / 2
Liver: 0 / 2
Spleen: 0 / 2

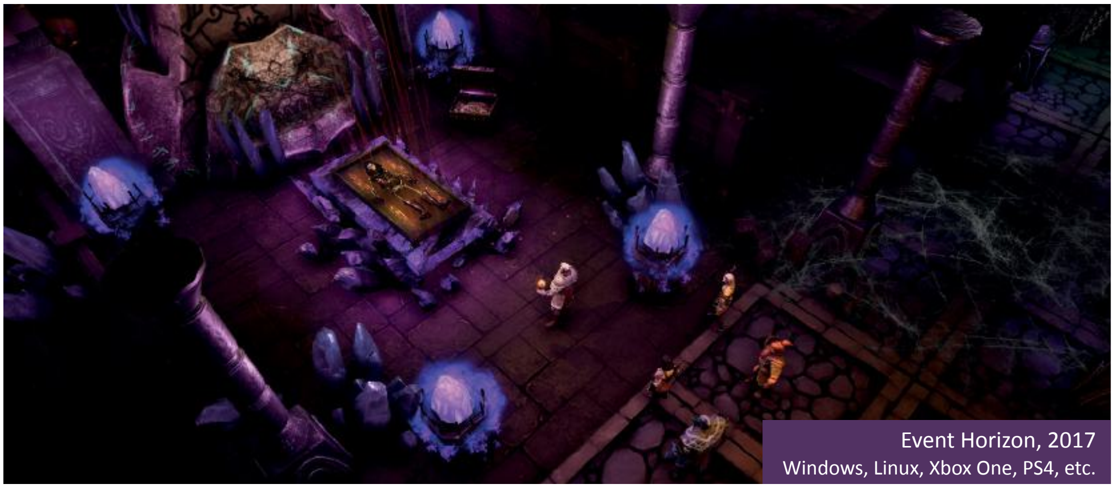
When you work deep underground, it's hard to keep track of whether it's the appropriate time to drink whiskey or the appropriate time to drink coffee. Eventually you just stop trying.

Increases your Speed by 1 for the rest of the day

Sell Value: 8 Meat

Although it's a short game, *WoL* has hundreds of items and pieces of equipment to find; they're used to solve puzzles and deliver some of the best jokes in the game

Tower of Time



Event Horizon, 2017
Windows, Linux, Xbox One, PS4, etc.

There was a time in CRPG history when dungeon delving was considered the sole goal of these games; *Tower of Time* draws wholeheartedly from this period. A party of fantasy stereotypes chews through combat encounters in hopes of reaching the bottom of a dungeon to save a dying world. Modernity also has its say in this retro mix, with progression being spread across half a dozen systems, heavy on the randomisation aspect. Whether crafting or finding items, *Diablo*-like affixes will shower the player's eyes as they optimise the party. A party that banters, bickers and offers player choice in how it resolves some dialogue encounters during exploration.

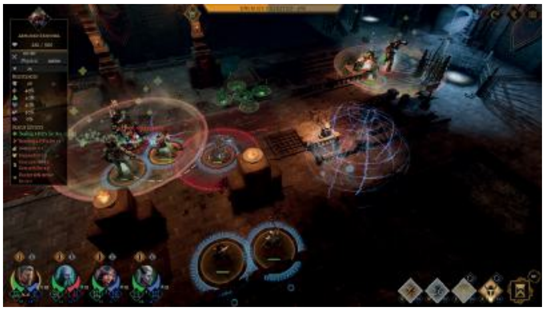
The central pillar here is the combat, which takes place in arenas different from the overworld travelled by the party while exploring the tower. Waves of enemies need to be handled in a manner not too unlike that in a tower-defence game with an action element. Tactical use of high-resource-cost, non-damaging abilities, such as summoning a giant cage to contain enemies while other threats are dealt with, is where *Tower of Time* comes to life. Most arenas feature spawn points in all directions, making it easy for enemies to escape the player's attention. Rewarding or punishing crisis management is clearly the game's core.

This sadly only applies to the early game. The myriad progression systems, along with the ever higher enemy count, supersedes the tactical aspect of the player's choices within the context of the combat. Late-game encounters boil down to how hard and fast can the party hit so as to not get overwhelmed. Resource management is also easily optimised, to the point where the player is doing MMO-style rotations rather than thoughtfully applying the party's abilities. Thus, the experience that the gameplay offers ends far before the narrative wraps up.

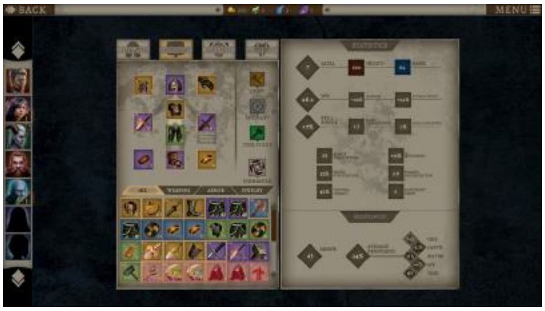
The narrative is also not without issues. The post-apocalyptic tone is communicated well through purple prose that knows its limits alongside morose ambient tracks, but the narrative fails in handling its blend of fantasy tropes with science fiction concepts. Lacking the glibness that series like *Might & Magic* had in mixing dragons and cyborgs, *Tower of Time* confronts the player with an internal logic which often falters.

Tower of Time is a chimera of influences, both old and new. That it never fully develops into its own beast is unfortunate, but the potential that lurks here can be glimpsed from time to time. It is those glimpses which reveal that while the game is not a must-play for the genre, it most certainly doesn't deserve to be forgotten by history. **LL**

In 2019, an RPGlite option was added, removing the narrative and turning the game into a straight dungeon crawl. Sadly, it doesn't really solve any gameplay issues.

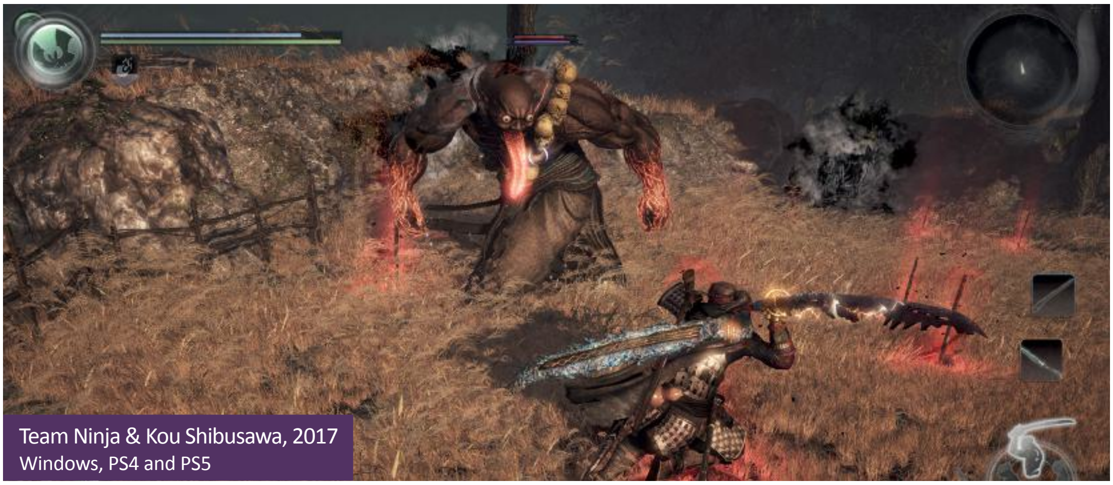


Combat is real-time, focused on positioning your characters and managing their cool-downs against multiple waves of enemies



Outside combat you can freely travel back to town, which you upgrade in order to level up your characters and craft or enchant equipment

Nioh



Team Ninja & Kou Shibusawa, 2017
Windows, PS4 and PS5

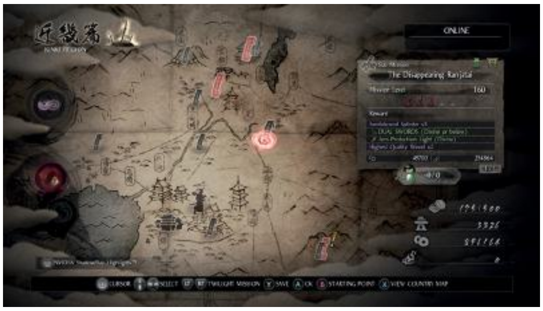
***Nioh*'s developers used a demo with a survey in 2016 to gather player feedback. It was played by over 850,000 people, and led to changes like adding more shortcuts to levels and removing weapon degradation.**

Back in 2004, *Nioh* started out as a multimedia project based on an unfinished script by Akira Kurosawa. Years passed without any news, and the game slowly disappeared, presumably into development hell. It was, then, a pleasant surprise that *Nioh* became one of Koei Tecmo's hottest new IPs when it finally made its debut in 2017.

During these years of development, Kou Shibusawa and Team Ninja scrapped the planned traditional RPG and produced a recognisable, attractive new action RPG instead, by taking the basic formula of From Software's Souls series and fusing it with a *Diablo*-style rarity-based loot system.

These borrowed elements and seemingly disparate creative choices might indicate that *Nioh* struggles to carve out its own identity, but that's not the case: the slick and versatile combat system and the dark, semi-historical setting of 1600s Japan have plenty new to offer once we look past the game's formulaic solutions.

The story puts real historical figures into a fantastic milieu, the protagonist being William Adams, who travels to a yōkai-infested Japan in the late Sengoku period, looking for a mysterious resource called Amrita (*Nioh*'s experience points). A Western man in the boots of a samurai – isn't it fitting that there is a duality in the game's systems as well?



The main missions offer large levels that advance the story, while side missions allow you to hunt for rare loot and test your skills against special bosses and encounters

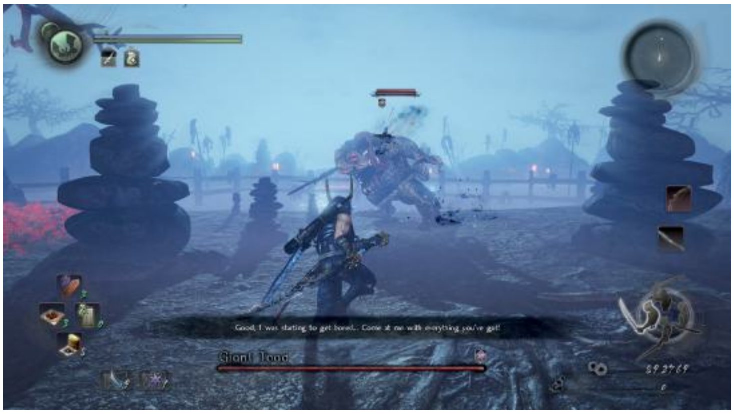
And yes, there is a slight disconnect between the frantic movement and the constant micromanagement of equipment at first, but these systems complement each other quite well. The player immediately faces a menacing atmosphere and unforgiving soldiers who randomly drop heaps of (mostly historically accurate) equipment upon death. Finding better gear is certainly a good option to have – danger is everywhere, enemies are quick to react, and William might even stop mid-fight to catch his breath, since attacking, blocking and dodging deplete Ki (stamina). However, players with a good sense of timing can perform a quick "Ki pulse" during combat to recover some of that lost stamina.

There is room for stylish self-expression here: *Nioh* has a wide variety of weapons, each of them offering a noticeably different playstyle. Katanas, dual swords and axes require different pacing, whereas more exotic weapons like the kusarigama, the spear or the odachi demand careful calculation of distance and attack timing. The three stances (high, medium, low) add another layer of complexity when choosing between an aggressive or defensive playstyle, with weapon skills allowing you to chain multiple stances into combos.

Melee weapons are complemented by ranged weapons (bows, rifles and hand cannons). Interestingly, they deal a staggering amount of damage with headshots, but ammunition is scarce. Each weapon has its corresponding mystic art, providing unique buffs, and there is also a proficiency system which improves the efficiency of a weapon by use.

Levelling up offers the chance to improve stats and unlock new abilities on the Samurai, Ninja and Onmyo skill trees. William can also use various consumables and magic talismans to temporarily boost his abilities or purge "yōkai realm" spots where Ki depletes rapidly, and demons become more dangerous.

> “The enjoyment that can be had from hack-and-slash games has been demonstrated in many titles, and it also gives players that are not fully accustomed to action games the chance to receive good equipment drops, broadening the appeal of the game by streamlining their experience. This also allows the player to enjoy playing the game over and over again for a long period of time, easing a common issue in many masocore titles.”
>
> *– Fumihiko Yasuda,*
> Nioh 1 *& 2’s Director*


Good, I was starting to get bored... Come at me with everything you've got!

Stances offers a lot of depth: beginners can just focus on a favourite stance, while advanced players can mix them mid-combo, starting an attack with the powerful high stance, then switching to low for a faster dodge

Finally, William can also summon one of several Guardian Spirits to give himself an edge, with more powerful attacks and a brief period of invulnerability.

The narrative unfolds in grand (even convoluted) cinematics between story missions, and while William can interact with NPCs, there is not much to do in terms of dialogue or choice. *Nioh* is a straightforward, linear game, but filled to the brim with content.

Players have access to an overworld map that gradually unlocks missions as the story progresses. Some of them are optional, but all of them can be replayed (alone or in a summon-based co-op session). Each area has different routes and collectibles, and most of the missions end in tough boss fights.

The endgame consists of running through the game again and again on higher difficulties. A largely inconsequential clan-like system is running in the background, yielding some extra rewards if the player is on the right team, and there are still multiple smaller features to discover, such as fighting fallen players, completing dojo challenges, finding hot springs, breaking down and crafting equipment, and so on. For a casual playthrough, these are not strictly necessary.

Since the main appeal involves exploring intricate new areas and facing increasingly tough and weird enemies, the added variety from the DLCs is welcome.

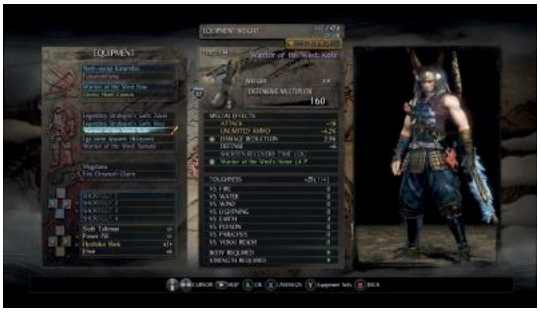
The updates also add new cosmetic options, so those who found William uninteresting can switch to several other more appealing character skins.

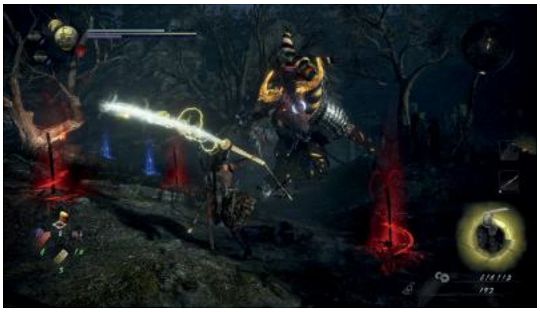
Unsurprisingly, a sequel to *Nioh* was quickly announced, released only two years after the first game. There are obvious drawbacks: assets, animations, even levels are unapologetically lifted from the first game, but that’s maybe beside the point. *Nioh 2* fully embraces and expands upon the best core features of the first game – it feels sharper, more focused and feature-complete.

Players start with a fully customisable character, nudging the series more towards hardcore RPG territory, and the new abilities to turn into various yōkai adds a new layer to the combat system, with wild demonic abilities and the power to counter attacks.

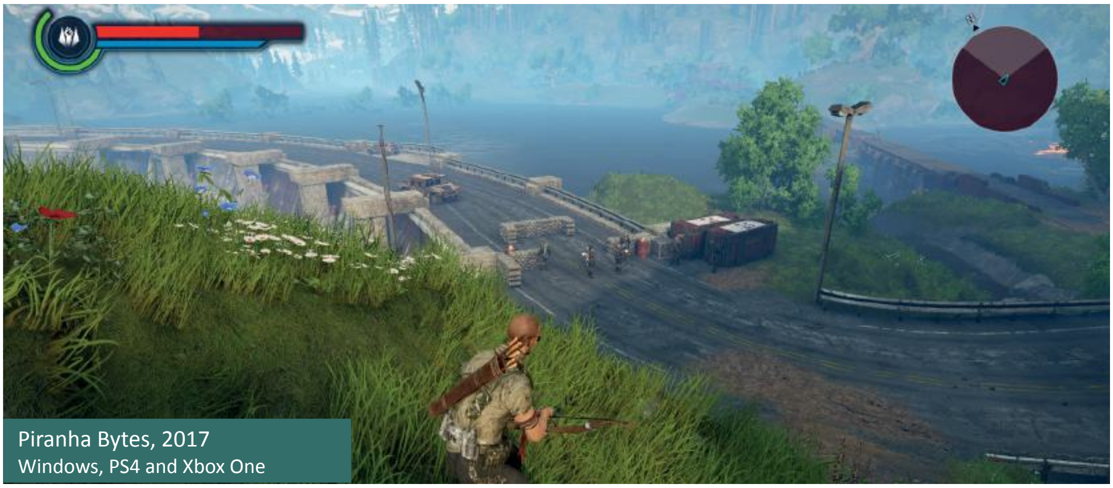
With the emphasis fully on character customisation and combat, the sequel’s overall tone shifts from the historical toward the fantastic (even nonsensical). These changes are a good fit for *Nioh 2*’s hectic gameplay. The result is a more dynamic and unpredictable variant of the first game, but despite the improvements, it can still feel too familiar.

In any case, both *Nioh* and its sequel are polished and content-rich action RPGs; together they form a solid foundation for a hopefully more innovative, longer series. **BF**


The complex loot system brings features such as coloured rarity tiers, sets, forging, reforging stats and changing appearance


Nioh 2’s main character is customisable and can turn into a yōkai, using acquired enemy skills and countering specific attacks

ELEX

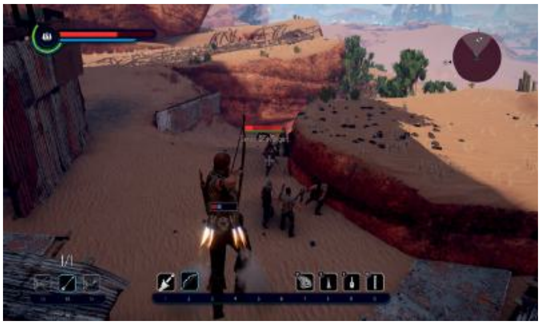


Piranha Bytes, 2017
Windows, PS4 and Xbox One

> **There are several mods for *ELEX*, but the only must-play one is *ELEX Overhaul*, which fully re-balances the game.**

ELEX is almost exactly what you should expect from Piranha Bytes by now; a third-person RPG set in an expansive, faction-based and open world. However, the earlier fantasy settings have been replaced by a post-apocalyptic world featuring a quasi-magic technology based on the eponymous ELEX.

What elevated this above my previous experiences with PB games (*Gothic 3* in particular) was the greatly improved level of general quality and technical stability. Unlike previous adventures, performance was uniformly excellent and I didn't run into a single broken mission or corrupted save. This is impressive, when you consider how expansive and non-linear the world is and the complete absence of loading screens.



The jetpack that you will come into possession of almost immediately is a welcome novelty, creating new possibilities for traversing the world as well as in combat

Although the game ultimately plays out in a similar fashion regardless of the path you take, the paths themselves can be very different depending on your allegiances and choices

Unfortunately, the clumsy and often aggravating combat that has frequently marred the Gothic and Risen series in the past also makes a return. As you would expect from an RPG with very little level scaling or gated content, it begins in frustratingly difficult fashion. That is par for the course with a PB game, and I wouldn't have it any other way. Still, this situation persists for a long time simply due to the mechanical difficulty of engaging in combat, especially when multiple foes are involved.

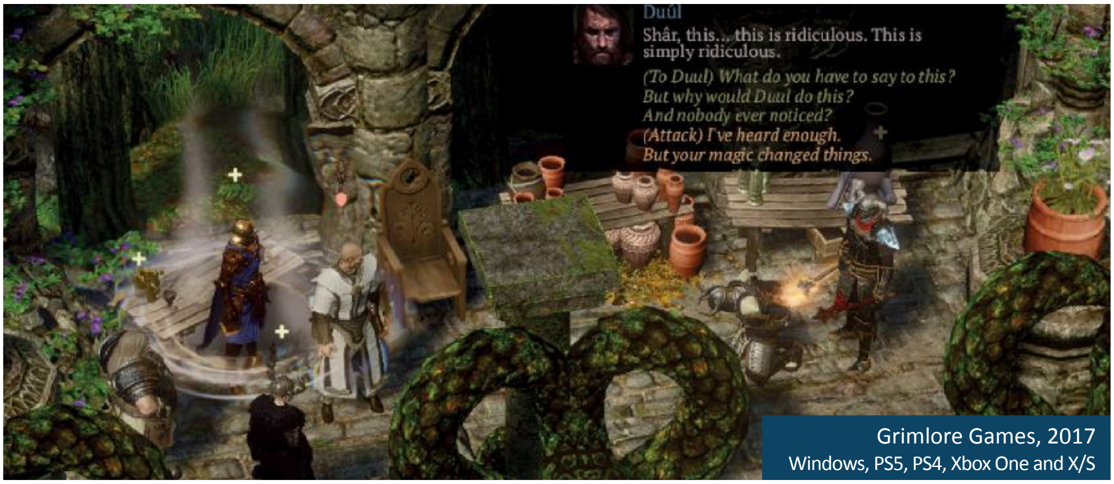
On the other hand, the game allows for dynamic behaviours between the different factions and roaming monsters that you can use to your advantage. Luring a powerful troll into what would otherwise be an overwhelming group of Albs is an enjoyable and legitimate method to gain an advantage over your foes.

ELEX offers three factions that you can join; the nature-loving Berserkers, the technology-worshipping Clerics and the profiteering scavengers, the Outlaws. These act as de-facto classes, although you are granted a lot of freedom in determining your character skills and equipment. Quests boil down to the typical archetypes; find something, deliver something, kill something. Despite this, there is considerable variation and a large number of role-playing opportunities.

What really sets *ELEX* apart is that the world of Magalan is a joy to explore. The level of meticulous hand-crafting on display is admirable, from the individual layouts and furnishings of buildings to the many written and audio logs that illuminate some of the events surrounding the end of the world. I spent far longer than I needed to rifling through the various locales, looting and making notes of areas to return to when I had the skills necessary to survive.

Ultimately, if you are seeking opportunities for exploration and adventure and can persevere through some initial frustration, then play *ELEX* now. **SGM**

SpellForce III


Duûl
Shâr, this... this is ridiculous. This is simply ridiculous.
(To Duul) What do you have to say to this?
But why would Duul do this?
And nobody ever noticed?
(Attack) I've heard enough.
But your magic changed things.

Grimlore Games, 2017
Windows, PS5, PS4, Xbox One and X/S

SpellForce 3 is a prequel to *SpellForce 1*, set in a time in which the world of Eo hasn't yet witnessed the cataclysmic events that will tear it to pieces. The main story concerns itself with a magical plague that appears after a civil war between mages and non-mages. The leader of the religious cult du jour, incidentally the catalyst for and other side of the mage war, sends you to investigate this disease.

Along the way, you meet the usual assortment of colourful personalities and societal rejects who act as your party members and will eventually become the founders of the Circle of Mages from *SpellForce 1* – a link that will evoke nerdy excitement in a fan.

As is par for the course, you engage in RTS battles while exploring a persistent world and completing quests with a personalised character. If we take into account the two stand-alone expansions, *Soul Harvest* and *Fallen God*, all the races from the first game make appearances as playable factions: Humans, Elves, Dwarves, Orcs, Trolls and Dark Elves.

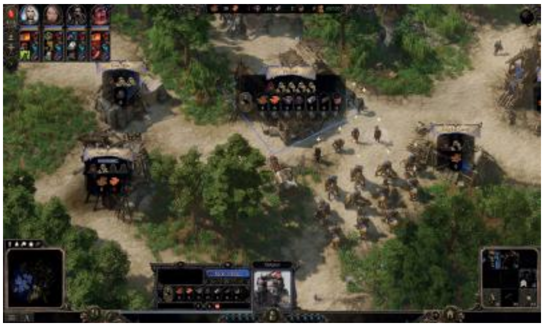
This time, both halves of this RPG/RTS hybrid are at least decent, and were polished to a never-before-seen extent. While this might seem like a step forward, and in certain respects it is, it doesn't achieve anything in a particularly genius way. When I'm playing the RPG part, I wish the game had more RPG in it, and the opposite is true for the RTS portion. It is not extreme enough in its approach to either, which paradoxically exacerbates the issue that plagues this entire franchise – it has never mixed anything; it is simply "doing" both an RPG and an RTS at the same time.

The developers tried to encourage the RTS aspect as an E-sport by offering a free version of the game that includes only skirmishes (*SpellForce III: Versus*), but it never picked up steam after a few symbolic tournaments online.

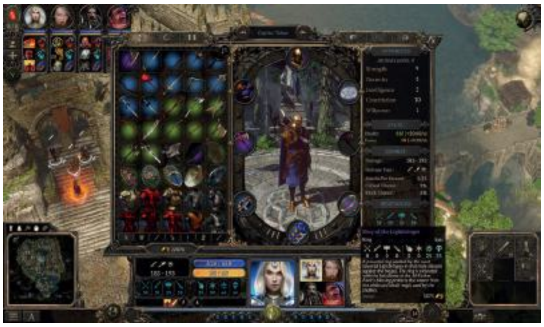
The RTS design owes much to *Warcraft III*; its influence is loud and proud, but the units lack the mechanical character and unique roles they would have in a Blizzard title, along with the game doubling down on surprisingly involved macro that is perhaps too complicated for its own good.

SpellForce III and its expansions are competent games worth playing, but they never rise above that. Although the RTS part is tantalizingly close to being the next *Warcraft III*, the devil is in the details. If you are only interested in this franchise as a historical curiosity, *SpellForce 1* remains more radical and nuanced, and as such more interesting and my personal recommendation. **LAC**

A remaster of the game was released in 2021. *SpellForce III: Reforced* adds new game modes, changes the UI and does a full re-balance of the game's mechanics.

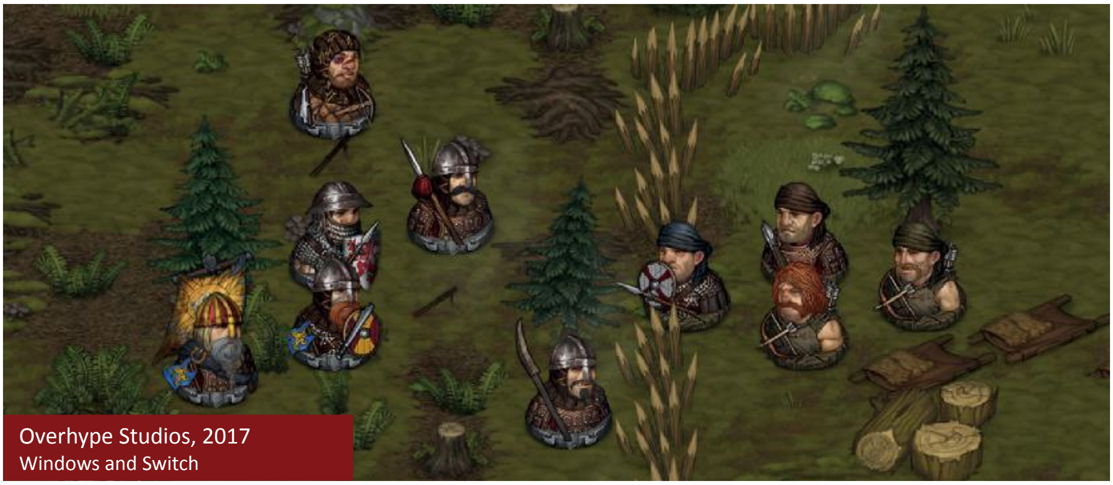


The RTS side combines *Warcraft III* inspirations with a sector system, forcing you to take control of areas and then manage workers and resources across the map



The RPG side offers multiple talent trees to pick from, a robust item system and very well-written dialogues, but feels detached from the RTS side

Battle Brothers



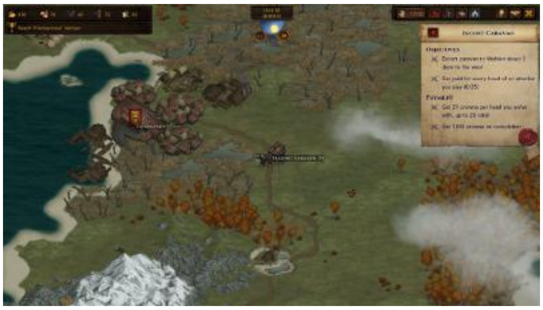
Overhype Studios, 2017
Windows and Switch

Battle Brothers is a brutal mercenary-company simulator set in a grim and low-magic fantasy world. The gameplay consists nearly exclusively of combat and company building, so if you think that a story is a must in a CRPG then look elsewhere.

This specialisation has paid off tremendously, because *Battle Brothers* has a great combat system. It's frustrating how close *BB* is to perfection: the first 30 hours of playtime are ecstatic, but thereafter some game problems will start to become apparent.

You begin the game in charge of a small band of mercenaries, free to do whatever you desire. You can visit nearby towns, recruit more brothers, buy provisions and new equipment, then talk to locals to negotiate your first contracts. These can come in various styles – defending the town against goblins, tracking down bandits, delivering an item, killing a warlord, hunting a beast, etc. The writing is sparse, but pretty decent, evoking a feeling of being a part of a nihilistic band of mercenaries in a decadent setting.

Once you have your contract, you travel the large, procedurally-generated world, looking for clues and tracks that will lead you to your objective. Some contracts might lead to brief CYOA text adventures, but most of the time you will end up doing what *Battle Brothers* does best: combat.



The world map is procedurally generated for every new game; it offers a few dynamic elements, like how towns attacked by bandits will be poorer and have fewer trade goods

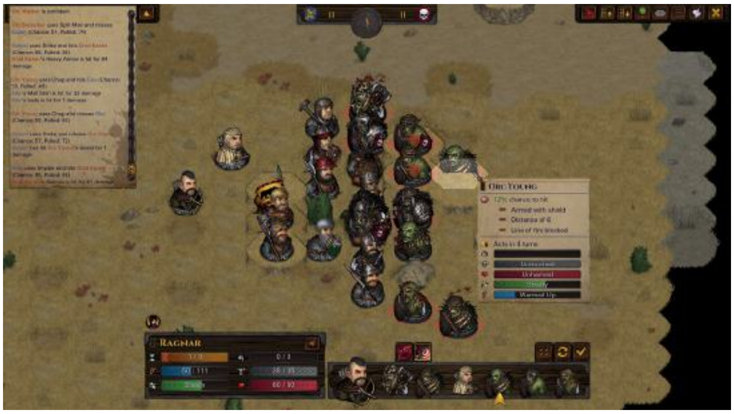
Combat is turn-based, set in a hexagonal grid, and superb. *BB* offers a wide range of equipment and perks to build your mercenary team. Each weapon, rather than being just a front for stats, has unique advantages and disadvantages, like flails ignoring shields or spears being able to create spearwalls. You will have to use different weapons depending on what enemies you are facing. I have long thought that this is how weapon systems should work in RPGs, and *BB* proves the concept works exceptionally well.

Another thing this game gets is enemy variety. Rather than just having a bunch of level-scaled HP sponges with different colour variations, *BB* has each enemy type behave differently on the battlefield. Orks rush the line, while undead revive after death and goblins throw nets. Battles usually are mechanically different depending on who you fight against. This is further enhanced by the fact that the AI is competent and can use available abilities to wreak havoc against your brothers – which brings us to the morale system.

I love the morale mechanic in this game. It feels great to see enemy hearts getting broken by witnessing their companions being slain. The moment when the enemy party morale reaches a tipping point and some opponents start routing feels glorious, especially when you send dogs after fleeing enemies. *BB* gets small details right – if an enemy that was engaging a crossbow unit in melee gets a morale break, he no longer blocks them from reloading their crossbows.

All this comes with nice presentation, pleasant graphics and music. The battle sounds deserve special praise, as they more than make up for the lack of animations in combat. *BB* doesn't fall into the trap of other turn-based games, which have very slow combat animations, but I still wish for an option to make the enemy movement even quicker.

> “When designing the game, our main goal was for the player to create their own story, not to actually win the game. Losing was always an integral part of the game and sometimes makes for the most heroic and memorable stories.”
>
> – *Jan Taaks,*
> Battle Brother*’s Designer*



Combat is brutal, tactical and full of layers; an Ork warband close to defeat can still decapitate one of your mercenaries and break the morale of the others, winning the battle

While combat is great, the game suffers from a lack of some kind of metagame system that gives a purpose to all the grinding in the middle/late game. In *Mount and Blade* you have kingdoms’ wars, which make you feel like a player in a dynamically changing world. Your choices matter there. *BB* only gives you some self-imposed ambitions, like raising your reputation with factions, gathering gold or levelling up your mercenaries to earn certain perks. There are endgame events like an Ork or Undead invasion, but they are undercooked and poorly explained.

The game can be very obscure with information – you can’t check the stats of brothers you are recruiting, and some mechanics are only explained on the game’s wiki. Surprisingly, there’s also no quick switch-weapon button, which makes having your first line use throw weapons on incoming enemies and then switch to melee a pain to manage. There are so many games with a quick-switch button in which I don’t feel a need to switch weapons, but when I get one in which I want to quickly change weapons I don’t get a quick-switch button. Fate is a cruel mistress.

Finally, the game is alleged to be meant for play on Ironman, but the risk/reward ratio in the middle/late game is at odds with that. I wouldn’t recommend Ironman unless you have a lot of metaknowledge.

The game has received three expansions as of this writing – *Beasts & Exploration* introduced legendary monsters for you to hunt; *Warriors of the North* added barbarians and new starting game options, like being a trader with better bartering skills or a cultist who draws in more cultists; *Blazing Desert* expanded the world map with an entirely new region, a Persian-like culture and the option to play as a gladiator.

Even if some flaws prevent it from being as good as it potentially could have been, *Battle Brothers* is certainly worth your time. **JMR**

Mods:

Legends Mod: A massive overhaul mod that greatly expands the game, offering new starting scenarios, more enemies, weapons, skills, etc. It’s so popular and extensive that it has its own wiki.

Tweaks and Fixes: A collection of several small mods that allow players to adjust the game to their tastes.

Smart Recruiter: Lets you see the stats of characters before recruiting them, allowing for informed choices.

Stronghold: Lets you build your own fortress in the world map, where you can store items and troops, customise shops and get special contracts.

The only long-term objectives are the ambitions that you select; this offers a lot of freedom, but can make the game feel aimless

You will have to pick and negotiate contracts, repair equipment, hire recruits, stock supplies, heal injuries and maintain morale

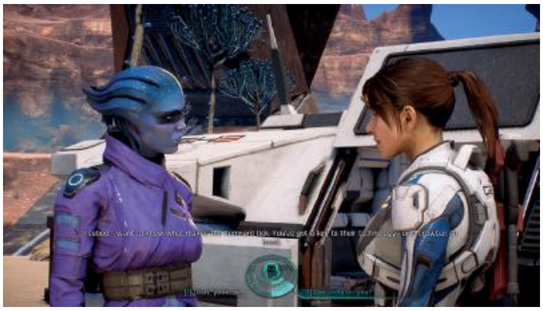
Mass Effect: Andromeda

BioWare, 2017
Windows, PS4 and Xbox One

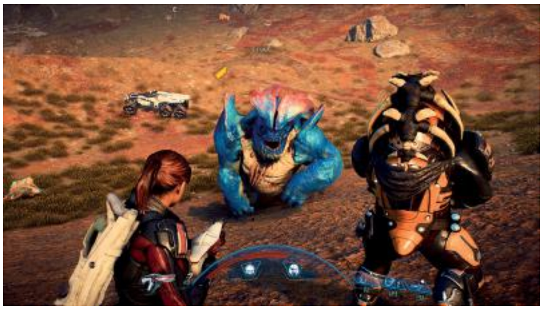
The Mass Effect trilogy is easily one of the most important and beloved videogame series ever, so making a sequel was always going to be a monumental task. With the original story concluded, development went to a team in Montréal, who decided to start anew, with new characters in a new galaxy.

They had a bold vision: to recreate the exploration of classic space RPGs like *Star Control* and *Starflight,* with hundreds of procedurally-generated planets (this was before 2016's *No Man's Sky* reveal*).* Sadly, combining such massive scope with BioWare's storytelling proved an overwhelming challenge. This, plus issues with staffing and EA's engine, Frostbite, led to years of work being scrapped. Most of the *ME:A* we got was hastily put together in the last 18 months of development.

Journalist Jason Schreier has published an in-depth examination of *ME:A's* development and launch.



ME:A replaces the famous renegade/ paragon dialogue options with four different tones: casual, emotional, logical and professional



Combat is the best in the series, adding melee weapons, new powers and a lot of mobility, thanks to the jetpack

Released in a very rough state, the game quickly became an online joke, mocked for its multiple bugs, bad dialogue and weird animations – characters look permanently confused, even when flirting or grieving. While the worst cases were patched, they highlighted the game's main flaw: its writing. *Mass Effect* is a series known for its characters, and seeing awkward lines of dialogue expressed through uncanny facial animations killed any emotion – and *ME:A*'s reputation.

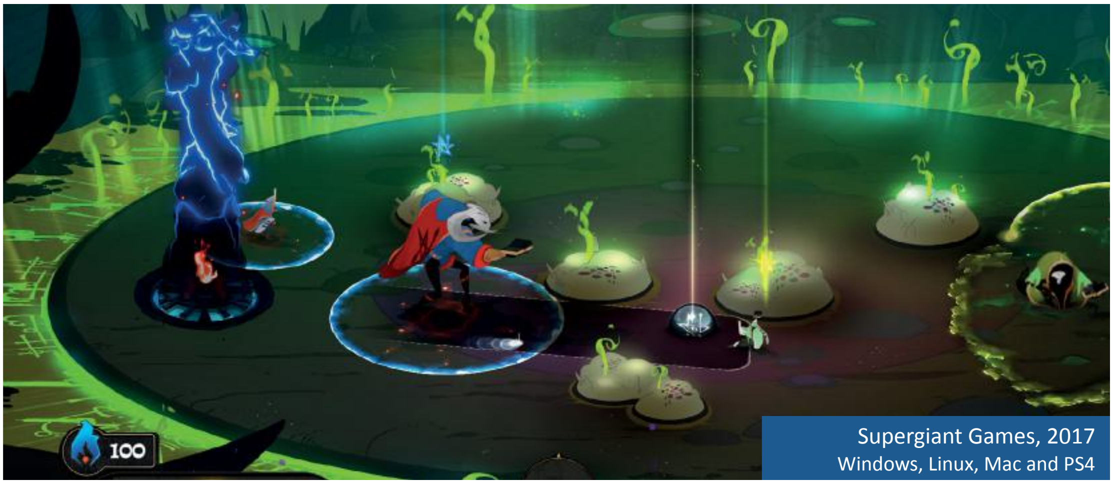
Story-wise, you play as the Pathfinder, responsible for guiding colony spaceships to settle new planets in the Andromeda galaxy while also uncovering the mystery behind ancient alien ruins. This setup would indeed be perfect for a scavenge hunt across multiple worlds but, without the procedurally-generated planets, the game follows a linear story structure similar to that of the original games, focusing on just a few planets.

However, the short development time means these few planets are still rather empty, especially the larger ones where you can drive vehicles. You explore these large, open environments by following quest markers while collecting resources for crafting and upgrades, making it all feel more like a Ubisoft open-world game with forgettable NPCs than a classic BioWare RPG.

Still, while it doesn't deliver the original goal of being a "*No Man's Sky* RPG", the planet exploration is the game's saving grace. The planets are gorgeous, the combat is the best in the series, and the introduction of jetpacks adds a welcome sense of verticality, even if it's rarely enforced outside simple platforming sections.

Mass Effect: Andromeda is not a terrible game, but it is a terrible *Mass Effect* game, failing to deliver on what fans came to expect from the series and from BioWare. You won't find charismatic companions, interesting choices or engrossing stories here, only faint glimpses of how great a "*No Man's Sky* RPG" could be. **FE**

Pyre



Supergiant Games, 2017
Windows, Linux, Mac and PS4

When adapting a sport into a videogame, storytelling is usually not a top priority. Developers of games like *Madden* or *FIFA* are more interested in the simulation aspects and, despite some recent attempts to add a story mode to these franchises, it is never the main focus. *Pyre*, on the other hand, tackles the idea of having a story-heavy sports game by creating its own sport, one that works well with the story it's trying to tell, as well as with the game's visual-novel and RPG mechanics.

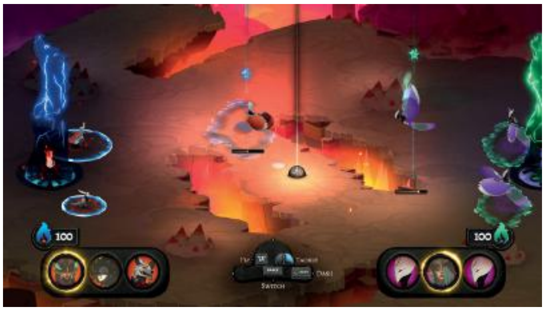
The sport itself is a sort of magic basketball, in a fantasy world full of different races, each bringing its own skills and playstyles (being very quick, able to fly, earn more points per goal, etc.). In many ways, *Pyre* tries to be a purer sports game: the matches have narration and there's even a sort of championship going on, with seasons and rankings. The game even has a separate local multiplayer mode.

You embody a faceless character who acts as some sort of manager and travels through the world with a party of players, playing against other teams and gathering new members along the way. They're not just playing for the sport though: everyone participating in the championship is an outcast, expelled from society and now being forced to live in some sort of limbo, with the hope of being able to return if they win their matches, or as the game calls them, rites.

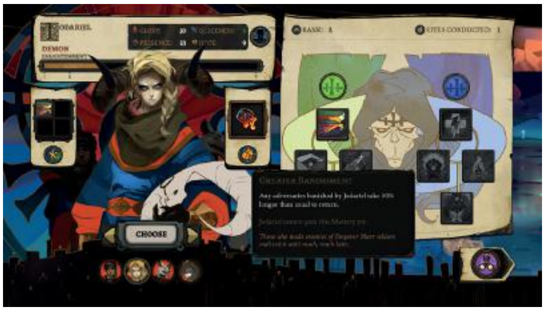
What makes it interesting, though, is how each character has their own backstory and motivation to return (romance, revenge, family and so on). By the end of each season, a final rite is played and the winning team can choose one player to be released back into society. The stakes get really high here, as winning means being able to see a character's story arc getting fulfilled, while losing can mean letting a rival get out, sometimes with bad consequences for the story.

This last match can severely impact gameplay, as the best player on your team is often also the one you're more emotionally invested in. Letting them accomplish their objectives can mean losing your best player, which ties nicely with everything else, as it forces you to try different characters while the story adapts accordingly, with new dialogues and events. And the game goes on whether you win or lose, with the results of the matches impacting the story and motivation of the team.

Pyre is an experimental game, one that might not be for everyone as the RPG and sports crowds don't seem to have a big intersection. It's a very interesting experiment nonetheless, breaking genre barriers and setting up non-linear narrative concepts that were later used in Supergiant's more successful *Hades* (2020). **ARZ**

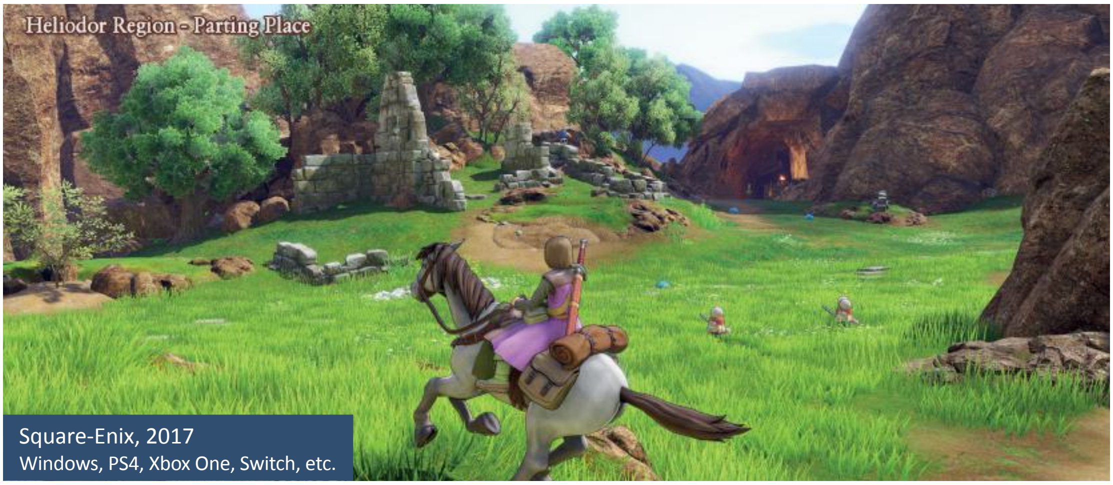


Your goal is to take the orb into the opponent's pyre, using your player's powers to evade or temporarily banish the other team's players



Players have stats, a unique skill tree and an accessory slot; personality is affected by your choices and characters may even refuse to play with certain teammates

Dragon Quest XI:
Echoes of an Elusive Age



Square-Enix, 2017
Windows, PS4, Xbox One, Switch, etc.

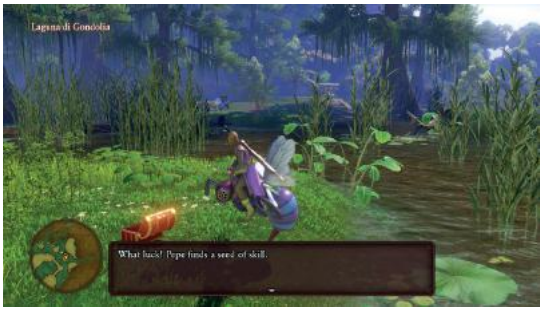
Widely celebrated in Japan, but a relatively niche franchise for Western audiences, the influential *Dragon Quest* essentially laid down the foundation for JRPGs in 1987. All mainline entries adhere to its formula: straightforward, turn-based RPGs with an emphasis on high fantasy-themed adventuring and uplifting, "good versus evil"-type narratives.

As is common for big Japanese titles, *DQXI* has a few Japan-only novels and audio dramas that expand the world and lore. The audio drama texts got an English fan translation by hirunoshi.

The most impressive thing about this series is how it maintained its identity throughout decades, with immediately recognisable artwork by Akira Toriyama (of *Dragon Ball* fame), the unmistakable symphonic scores of Koichi Sugiyama, and Yuji Horii's direction. From its first entry to its last, Dragon Quest has stayed true to its fairy tale-like atmosphere and overall structure, down to the smallest details (progression system, sound effects, colourful cartoon monsters).

While developers kept adding many new ideas with each entry, it was always a reliable series of rigorous tradition. This makes its evolution quite interesting to compare to more experimental and more widely known series, such as Final Fantasy.

But Dragon Quest might seem also somewhat unapproachable in the West, given its history of delayed localisations, an early title change (*Dragon Warrior*), and entries being exclusive to vastly different platforms.



Some dungeons allow you to ride defeated monsters, using their abilities to reach new areas and find hidden treasures

Fortunately, Square-Enix introduced *Dragon Quest XI* on multiple platforms to a massive new audience, making it the first mainline, localised single-player Dragon Quest ever to be introduced on a Windows-based PC, giving the series a much-needed boost in visibility outside Japan.

As with most other episodes in the franchise, *Dragon Quest XI* is largely a stand-alone adventure, and a perfect entry point for new audiences, who at first might be taken aback by the overly colourful presentation and the constantly blaring orchestra, two key features of the series.

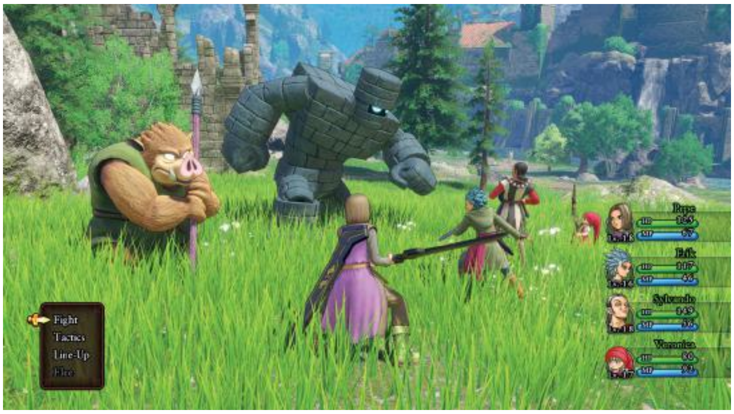
The game follows the story of the orphaned Luminary, who bears the mark of a chosen one and must save the land from an ever-growing evil – this formulaic premise sets up a highly detailed and nuanced adventure on a very large scale.

As tradition goes, the main hero is a nameless, voiceless character without any real personality to speak of, serving as a sort of blank canvas for the player (there's no customisation, though). As he travels the world of Erdrea towards Yggdrasil to obtain the Sword of Light, he encounters colourful characters, eventually assembling a team of eight companions. These characters include a wide range of personalities, each having a unique storyline and a matching preset class.

This translates into the turn-based combat rather well, each character having equipment and a distinct set of abilities that reflect their personality, and the team is always well balanced. During combat, four active combatants can be switched freely for a passive member, even while they are dead.

Traversal is done in a third-person view, either on foot or mounted, visiting easily recognisable – and to an extent, video-gamey – locales from grasslands, through deserts and frozen kingdoms, to lava-soaked hellscapes.

> "We want to provide simple enjoyment for people; we don't want to make complex things for people to think about. In the real world, there are so many difficulties people are facing. Sometimes, there are no rewards. They don't get any rewards for those difficult things in life, but at least in the game, we want to make sure they will be rewarded for working hard to play the game."
>
> *– Yuji Horii,*
> *Dragon Quest series' creator*



The turn-based combat is very traditional, but never gets boring thanks to the lovingly animated cartoon monsters and the option to evade battles while exploring

This might sound unoriginal, but the stories attached to them make every town, kingdom, dungeon or island unique and memorable.

When entering a new area, the party learns about the quirks of the inhabitants, discovering a dangerous, local problem that eventually leads to a boss fight. There is a linearity of narrative here, new companions appearing after important events, but the exploration is free-form – enjoyable and rewarding, as the game just keeps doling out new story and gameplay content even after dozens and dozens of hours. All this is done with visuals, pacing and a level of polish that's fairly impressive by today's standards.

The tropes and clichés presented here might be considered quaint, but in a market now saturated with darker role-playing games, an uplifting and heroic presentation somehow feels refreshing again. There is also a deeper layer underneath the more immediately visible features and beats, as the story touches on melancholic, existential themes in its later stages.

Perhaps because of its massive length, few reviewers pointed out these more subversive elements of the hero's myth. The end-game portion not only adds new story content, but it also asks the players to re-examine their journey so far, to contemplate concepts like choice, loss and the true meaning of sacrifice.

Equipment
Head
Helmets
Effect on Attributes
Defence
Magical Might
Magical Mending

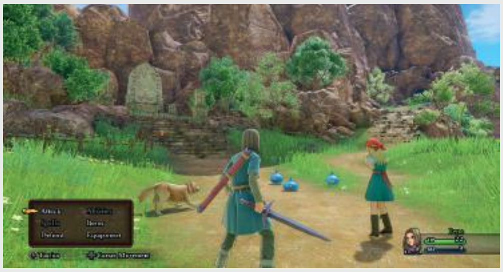
Each party member has their own talent tree and can use different weapon types, giving them some build flexibility

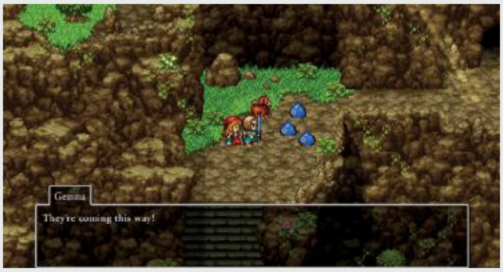
The late reveal, done after a full game's length, serves a purpose here: the length of the journey is a key component of one of the twists in the narrative.

Ultimately, this story is still very much a fairy tale, utilising its power to great effect. Most players will find the overall structure, themes and gameplay very familiar, maybe to a fault. *Dragon Quest XI*'s most immediately recognizable aspect is not innovation, but polished, generous content and an earnest call to adventure. **BF**

The Definitive Edition:

DQXI had a 3DS version developed alongside the console/PC version, featuring the same story but vastly different graphics and an option to play it in 3D or in a 2D mode similar to that of 16-bit JRPGs. The Switch port combined both versions, allowing players to experience the game with the PC/console 3D graphics of the 3DS 16-bit mode. It also added extra content and an orchestral soundtrack. This version came to PCs as *The Definitive Edition* (2020).

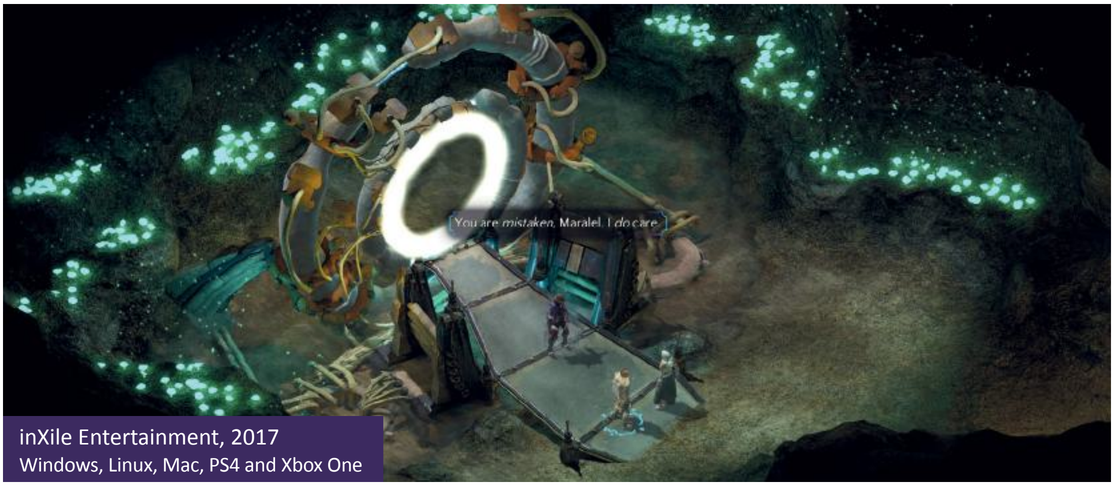




Gemma

They're coming this way!

Torment:
Tides of Numenera

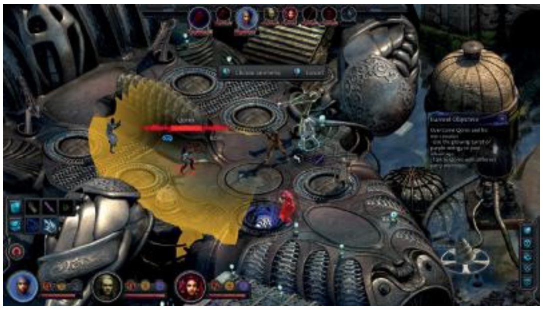


inXile Entertainment, 2017
Windows, Linux, Mac, PS4 and Xbox One

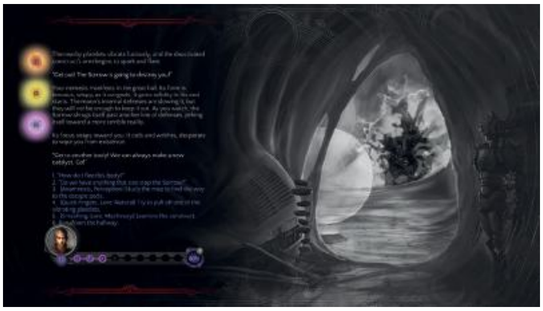
***Tides of Numenera*'s Kickstarter campaign was the biggest ever at the time, featuring a team of several famous writers and developers, and raising over $4 million.**

Torment: Tides of Numenera is a CRPG explicitly developed as a spiritual successor to 1999's *Planescape: Torment*, a title esteemed ever more in the years after its release. Indeed, *Planescape*'s legacy was such that the promise of a new *Torment* game in 2013 spurred the game's Kickstarter campaign to raise a record $4,188,927 million.

T:ToN was clearly designed with its predecessor in mind: both games feature voluminous amounts of expository text, a protagonist whose particular form of immortality informs the central conflict, and an approach to problem-solving that emphasizes dialogue over combat. Using a modified version of the *Numenera* tabletop RPG system, the game is centred around skill checks that function consistently across contexts.



The game's battles, called "crises", are played in turn-based mode; most allow the player to either fight or use skills to end the conflict, but none of the options are well-developed



Skill checks play a central role in dialogue, combat and CYOA segments; the three main stats provide a pool of effort points that can be spent to increase your chances of succeeding

Players select one of three classes – glaive, jack or nano – which respectively emphasise the primary statistics of might, speed and intellect. Much of *T:ToN* is spent performing skill checks, drawing from these stat pools to successfully navigate interactions, dialogue or combat. In each case, electing to spend more points from the relevant pool increases the likelihood of success. However, this economy is fairly generous: much of the game can be played with a comfortable quantity of resources in reserve. Some actions also provoke changes in your character's Tides, the game's set of colour-based alignments.

The game's strengths largely stem from the *Numenera* setting – environments like The Bloom, a city of living flesh and tentacled maws, feel genuinely fresh and novel. The ambiguous limits of the setting give *T:ToN* a broad licence in representing the Ninth World and events within it; to the game's credit, this assortment of styles retains a sense of internal coherence.

Despite the game's avowed disinterest in armed conflict, many of its systems emphasise combat utility. Weapons, armour and single-use 'cyphers' are littered throughout the game environments in support of engagements that may only occur a handful of times. When fighting does break out, the turn-based encounters feel laboured, largely due to the brief pauses that intervene between events. This issue is exacerbated at scale; unfortunately, many of *T:ToN*'s mandatory battles are maximalist by design, often spawning a dozen enemies to create a sense of overwhelming pressure.

Tides of Numenera stands in the shadow of its predecessor, its design pillars modelled on *Planescape*'s most memorable features. Ultimately, though, this commitment produced an ossified design whose novel features are largely stifled – a monument to the inherent conservatism of nostalgia in game design. **AT**

The Council

Big Bad Wolf, 2018
Windows, PS4 and Xbox One

Attempts to merge the adventure and RPG genres have been sparse throughout history. Though both genres revolve around one or more prominent player-characters who embark on a quest, defeat adversaries, resolve mysteries, save the day and go through some development on the way, the mechanics provide the difference. In place of the detailed character and combat systems typically featured in RPGs, adventure games traditionally focus on puzzles and dialogue, with contemporary examples placing even greater focus on narrative in lieu of traditional elements.

What makes *The Council* stand out is the way it attempts to marry these two mechanical worlds. This is primarily an adventure game, yet the first thing you will do upon starting the game is to choose a character class for Louis de Richet – the affable, thoughtful protagonist – who can be a Detective, Diplomat or Occultist, each featuring its own skills, such as Diversion, Conviction, Subterfuge and Vigilance. De Richet also possesses traits and talents, and starts off at Level 1. An adventure game, but already in deep RPG territory.

De Richet's search for his missing mother following the heist of an occult artefact finds him rubbing shoulders with a who's-who of the 18th century, including historical figures such as George Washington and Napoleon Bonaparte, all invited to an island by a mysterious figure named Lord Mortimer.

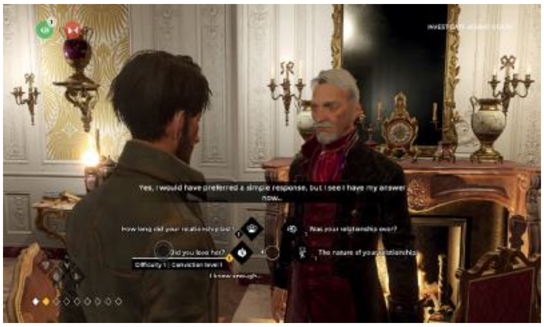
Gameplay runs along two modes: traditional puzzles, some of which are quite involved, as well as dialogue-based encounters, in which de Richet attempts to persuade, mollify or extract information from these figures. For the puzzles, the skill system acts both as the gatekeeper of certain solution paths (such as when de Richet is unable to pick a lock), and also as a glorified hint system, whereby passing a skill check grants de Richet a helpful insight.

For dialogues, it enables de Richet to tailor his approach towards the various characters he talks with. Every character possesses strengths and weaknesses corresponding to de Richet's skills that render them more or less susceptible to his specialisations.

In between, the game is punctuated by numerous choices de Richet needs to make as the story progresses. The consequences and the reactivity on offer are another mark of the game's RPG credentials.

The Council is no masterpiece. Its RPG systems are poorly balanced, and the quality of the story sharply declines towards the end. But as an experiment it is successful, and will hopefully serve as a blueprint for years to come. **AY**

***The Council* consists of five episodes, which were all released between March and December 2018. The first chapter is freely available.**



Yes, I would have preferred a simple response, but I see I have my answer now...

How long did your relationship last?

Was your relationship over?

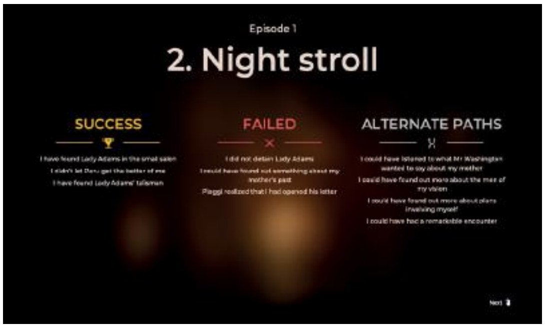
Did you love her?

Difficulty 1 | Conviction level 1

The nature of your relationship

I knew enough...

To use skills you need to spend Effort Points, a limited resource; the cost is tied to your skill level and the difficulty, adding an extra layer of complexity



Episode 1

2. Night stroll

SUCCESS

I have found Lady Adams in the small salon

I didn't let [illegible] get the better of me

I have found Lady Adams' talisman

FAILED

I did not detain Lady Adams

I could have found out something about my mother's past

Piaggi realized that I had opened his letter

ALTERNATE PATHS

I could have listened to what Mr Washington wanted to say about my mother

I could have found out more about the man of my vision

I could have found out more about plans involving myself

I could have had a remarkable encounter

At the end of each chapter the game displays your choices, outcomes, and missed opportunities; it's also when you'll get XP and level up

Pillars of Eternity II: Deadfire

Obsidian Entertainment, 2018
Windows, Linux, Mac, PS4 and Xbox One

The original *Pillars of Eternity* marked a point of transition for isometric RPGs. Long thought to be a style of game not fit for the modern market, *Pillars* proved through crowdfunding that many were still invested in the genre. Together with *Wasteland 2* (2014) and *Divinity: Original Sin* (2014), it revitalized the isometric RPG scene, bringing back the formula that had defined Infinity Engine classics like *Baldur's Gate* and *Planescape: Torment*.

***Pillars of Eternity II: Deadfire* was crowdfunded on Fig, an investment platform, raising $4,407,598 in February 2017.**

Pillars of Eternity 2: Deadfire was released at the tail-end of that revival period. By then, isometric RPGs were straying further away from the design philosophies of the past. Much like the original, it's a game representative of a shift in the RPG space. As such, it attempted to accommodate the new expectations of players and address the shortcomings of the first game.

The premise is pretty straightforward. Eothas, a rogue god, destroys your fortress from the first game, killing you in the process, and heads to the eponymous Deadfire Archipelago. The god of death, Berath, holds your life for ransom and tasks you with stopping Eothas' plans. Leaving the Renaissance-inspired setting of the first game in favour of an Age of Sail maritime adventure was a brave choice and it paid off. With it, *Deadfire* gained its greatest assets: non-linear exploration and an intricate faction system.

Several characters from *Pillars 1* are back, and you can import your save files with your story choices; you can also start directly with *Deadfire,* but you will miss some important backstory

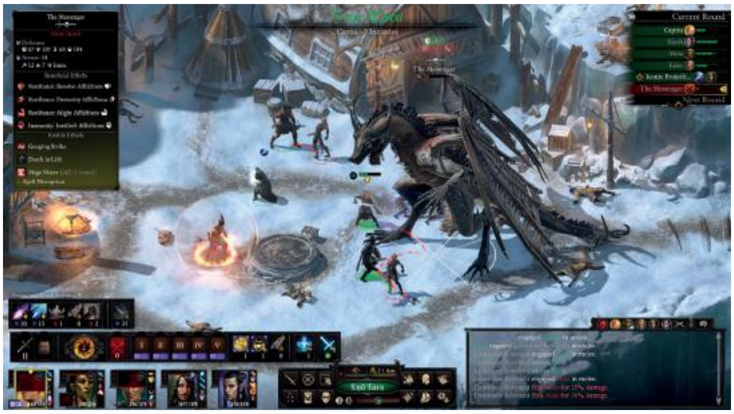
Abandoning the overt linearity of the original *Pillars* did wonders for the gameplay loop of *Deadfire*. After a short intro, the player is free to explore in any way they see fit. Most islands offer something worth uncovering, be it a side-quest, a challenging encounter, or unique items. Thanks to a very customisable level-scaling system, focusing on exploration will not warp the difficulty curve of the main quest, a common problem in RPGs. That freedom sells the seafaring fantasy and organically teaches the player about the groups fighting for control of the archipelago.

There are four major factions the player will meet throughout the story. The Huana, the native people of the Archipelago, are in direct conflict with the Royal Deadfire Company, an imperialist force; the Vailian Trading Company exploits the islands' natural resources for profit, and the Príncipi sen Patrena are pirates torn between traditionalist and anarchist ideals. The game's depiction of colonialism gives the setting depth as well as clear stakes and is its strongest narrative thread. The factions are ever-present and always inform the player's actions.

The other narrative linchpin is the pantheon of gods that defined the previous game's story. While they have lost some of their mystique, their more active role in the narrative allows for captivating roleplaying. The three expansions released for *Deadfire - Beast of Winter*; *Seeker, Slayer, Survivor*; and *Forgotten Sanctum* – are where this thematic thread is best explored. Each one focuses on a particular god, expanding their lore, and they represent the game at its best.

Unfortunately, the power struggle within the Deadfire Archipelago and the machinations of the gods end up being too disconnected from each other. As a result, the main story feels thematically incoherent.

> "The biggest thing that was added post-launch was turn-based combat. This was a thing we didn't do from the beginning because the Infinity Engine games are real-time with pause. But, about a billion people bought *Divinity: Original Sin 2*, so let's give it a whirl. [...] So, some lessons learned here: we made some assumptions about real-time with pause and turn-based combat that maybe don't apply anymore. It's not the late '90s or early 2000s."
>
> *– Josh Sawyer,*
> PoE 2: Deadfire*'s Design Director*



Deadfire has a very complex combat and character system, but information is very clearly displayed to the player; the addition of turn-based combat allows for very tactical gameplay, especially on the higher difficulties

It's a shame because *Deadfire* has pretty good writing and the world of Eora remains full of small details that make it feel lived-in. But worldbuilding can only go so far, and despite the main story having interesting implications, it fails at interweaving all the elements that otherwise make *Deadfire* compelling.

Visually, the game excels, with gorgeous backgrounds that rank among the very best in the genre and make the unique setting shine. Critical story moments are conveyed through evocative artwork reminiscent of old-school RPG sourcebooks. For the soundtrack, Justin Bell returned as the composer, with bolder instrumentation that elevates *Deadfire*'s music.

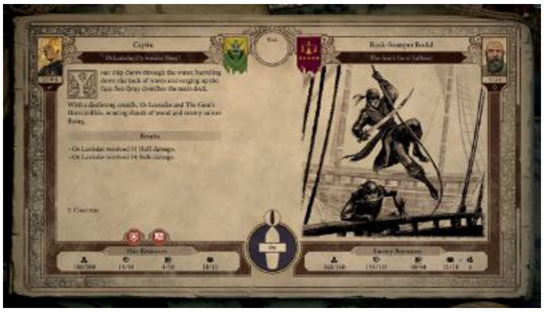
Many improvements were made to the mechanics of the first *Pillars*. Fights have become simpler to parse, as the number of party members went from the traditional Infinity Engine six to only five. Character progression is deeper, thanks to the addition of multi-classing. Equipment has been redesigned to be more impactful and unique, which the original *Pillars* sorely lacked. By far the biggest improvement was the change in the design and frequency of the encounters. The first game was full of "trash fights" with no mechanical or narrative meaning and as a result, its pacing suffered. In the sequel, most encounters are placed with intentionality and present specific challenges.

Not all innovations were successful. Being a ship captain, a crucial aspect of the experience, was great for exploration but brought about gameplay issues. Finding and recruiting new crew members is fun, but managing their morale is so easy it becomes an afterthought. Ship-to-ship combat is both convoluted and shallow, soon becoming a chore. It was so poorly received that it was made optional through a patch, making the ship upgrade system feel almost vestigial.

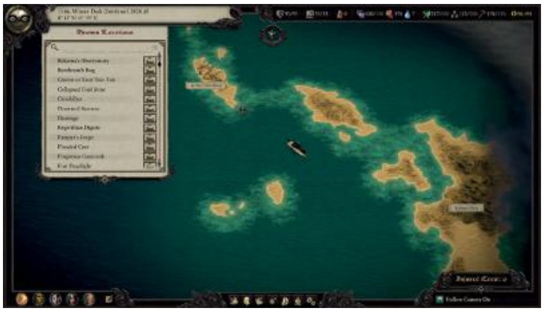
Inspired by the success of *Divinity: Original Sin 2*, the developers later added the choice of playing using either real-time-with-pause or turn-based combat. That both modes work so well is a testament to *Deadfire*'s combat balance. The following year, *Pathfinder: Kingmaker* (2018), another real-time-with-pause RPG, added turn-based mode in a patch as well. Its sequel, *Pathfinder: Wrath of the Righteous* (2021), had both options at launch, proving *Deadfire*'s model to be a possible answer to the recurring combat debate.

Despite its flawed main quest and some badly implemented mechanics, *Pillars of Eternity 2* offers an engaging roleplaying experience, thanks to its well-written side-quests, fun exploration, stunning presentation and deep tactical combat. Poor sales mean that the future of the *Pillars* franchise is uncertain, but it has managed to leave its mark on the genre**. LMM**

There are several mods for *Deadfire*, but we recommend using only the *Community Patch* and *Enhanced User Interface* mods for a first playthrough.



You can battle other ships and board them, but the text-based ship combat became optional after receiving a lot of negative feedback



Deadfire offers a lot of freedom, not only in story choices and party builds, but also in exploring its massive archipelago

Monster Hunter: World

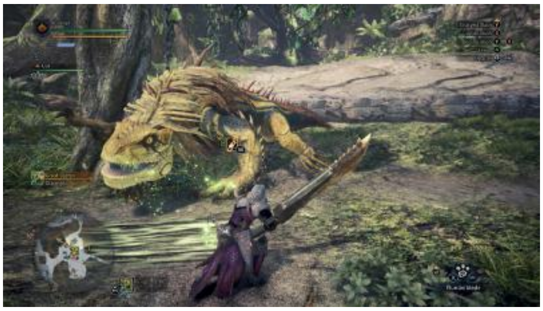
Capcom, 2018
Windows, Xbox One and PS4

The Monster Hunter series began in 2004 and has since released over 18 games and spin-offs, plus card games, a manga and a 2021 live-action movie.

The fifth main instalment of Capcom's wyvern slaying simulator went big, and I don't mean just because it's the first *Monster Hunter* title on home consoles since 2009. *Monster Hunter: World* introduced a completely new generation of players to the world of its monster-grinding, weapon-smithing, armour-crafting treadmill.

The game sent players to the New World, where giant kaiju called Elder Dragons gather, and put them into the role of pioneers who defeat and capture as many monsters as they can. The spoils and severed body parts from these hunting missions are upcycled into better equipment, which in turn enables players to hunt stronger monsters in a never-ending loot spiral that encompasses several weapon and armour types to experiment with, from hammers and longswords to bows, guns and transforming fantasy switch-axes.

But *Monster Hunter: World* brought more to the table than just perpetual crafting and gathering. For the first time in the series' history, backed by the hardware power of the PC, PlayStation 4 and Xbox One, players did not stalk their prey in several small areas connected by loading screens, but in just a handful of thematically connected, enormous locales alive with different flora and fauna independent from the hunters' objectives.

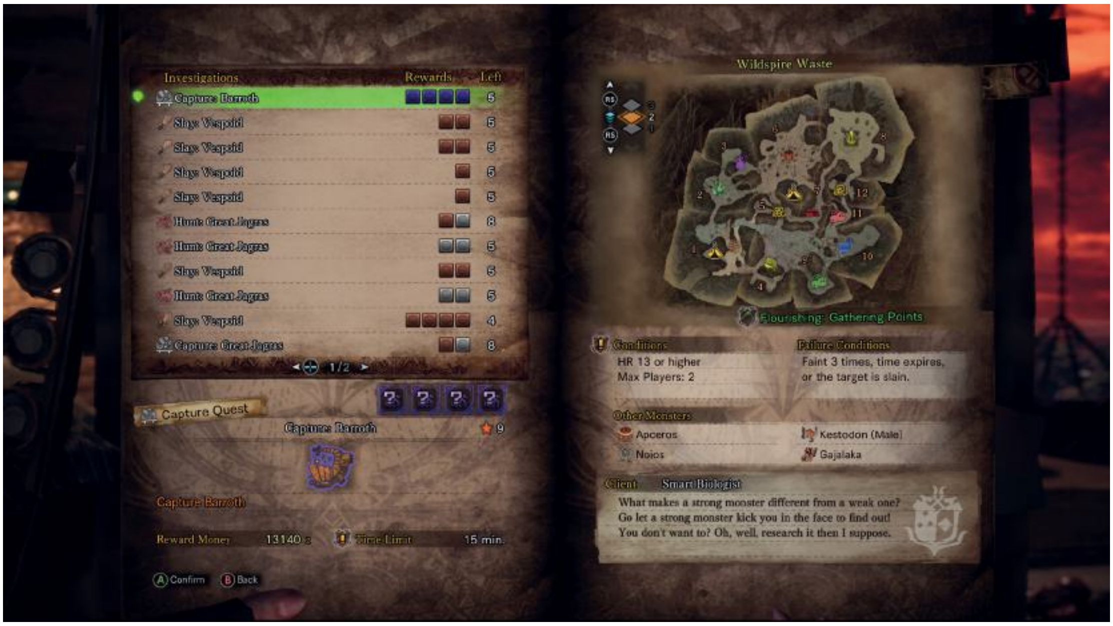


Monsters have very complex behaviours, reacting to the environment, to injuries and to other monsters, such as a Great Jagras changing its attack pattern after eating a smaller monster

The new, open-world aspect brought mainstream appeal, but also the promise of something more than just the crafting workflow for which the Monster Hunter series was notorious outside its fandom. It opened the franchise to an audience that did not necessarily care for the crafting spiral, but for the main plot or their own narrative agency within the thriving game world. *Monster Hunter: World* showed that streamlining the more tedious part of a game series that revolves around repeated missions and crafting orders opens up a space in the fandom for those feeling enamoured of the beautiful atmosphere of the game world and the biosphere's surprising interactions.

I was part of this new audience. Apart from dabbling in one of the handheld Monster Hunter games for a dozen hours or so, the series had held no appeal to me before. The effort needed to find pleasure in the complex battle system, often sabotaged by the lack of enough hardware power or a second analogue stick on handhelds, was too much for me. But when *MH:W* came around, my perspective on the series changed.

Suddenly, the biosphere of this hardcore crafting simulator started becoming its own protagonist. Hunting dragons in an arena is cool, but doing it in an ecosystem that reacts to the dragon's way of life, to its defensive manoeuvres and to my aggression is incredible. Monsters dig holes to hunt smaller prey or chase away predators, they lie down to sleep, they protect their kin and their eggs. Most incredibly, they fight turf wars for habitat. The environment of *MH:W* is abundantly alive, even without hunters stirring up trouble. The biggest monsters are in a constant struggle for the best feeding places or highest vantage points. Encountering a water leviathan and a rock dragon in deadly embrace for a fertile strip of coastline should be a hunter's dream to take advantage of.



Investigations	Rewards	Left
Capture: Barroth	■■■■	5
Slay: Vespoid	■■	5
Slay: Vespoid	■■	5
Slay: Vespoid	■	5
Slay: Vespoid	■	5
Hunt: Great Jagras	■■	8
Hunt: Great Jagras	■■	5
Slay: Vespoid	■■	5
Hunt: Great Jagras	■■	5
Slay: Vespoid	■■■■	4
Capture: Great Jagras	■■	8

Reward Money 13140 z
Time Limit 15 min.

Conditions
HR 13 or higher
Max Players: 2

Failure Conditions
Faint 3 times, time expires, or the target is slain.

Other Monsters
Apceros
Kestodon (Male)
Noios
Gajalaka

Client: Smart Biologist
What makes a strong monster different from a weak one? Go let a strong monster kick you in the face to find out! You don't want to? Oh, well, research it then I suppose.

As you begin a hunt, you enter a large open area and must search for your prey, using the environment and other monsters to your advantage

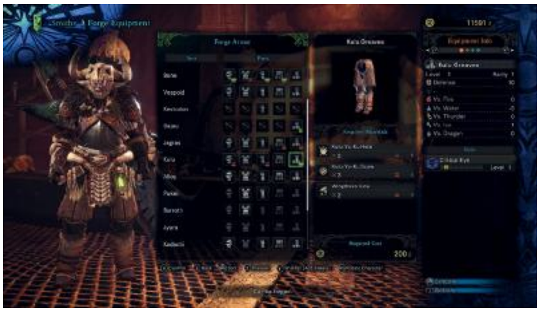
For me, it was way often more like watching a nature documentary. Sitting on a high rock, watching wyrm and wyvern duel it out until one ran off and the other started reaping its new hunting grounds by healing up on herbivores, I felt like the David Attenborough of the virtual world. Sneaking down from my rock, collecting splintered-off fang pieces and scales from the battle, and herbivore dung and broken egg shells from the riled-up prey, made me the biologist the game's story wanted me to become, but by the actual methods of a biologist instead of those of a big game hunter.

On top of that, all of the monsters are just the right mixture between weird fantasy creature and reasonably realistic habitat dweller. From the puffy, fluffy blowfish flyer that lives between the coral fields of a dried-up ocean floor to the ore armadillo that digs tunnels through volcanos to chomp on lava snakes: they work as habitants of their biome just as well as they do as enticing enemies to make a pauldron out of.

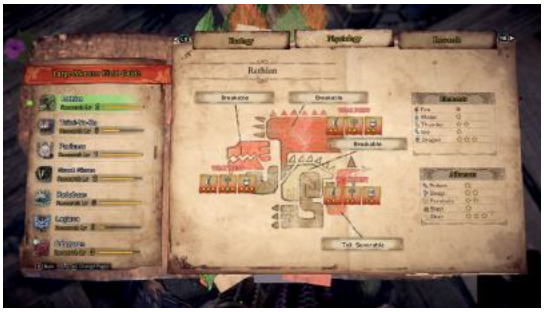
Underneath this aesthetic appeal lies a complex crafting setup that pleased even the longest running series fans. Weapon tutorials are still not great, but a forgiving game-over system, plenty of support items and co-operation options for new players help soften the first brush with more complex mid- and endgame content.

Getting familiar with any weapon by button mashing one of the weaker enemies into defeat is easy enough, while mastering a weapon still takes practice and provides enough effective results and inherent satisfaction that newcomers might become entangled in the *Monster Hunter* loot spiral. Difficulty spikes can be alleviated with the help of up to three strangers through the online function for those struggling, or ramped up even further through optional side missions against even stronger "Tempered" enemies.

Bridging the rift between newcomers to the series and veteran hunters made *Monster Hunter: World* the bestselling Capcom game of all time, with over 20 million units sold mid-2020. Deservedly, I say. **PMW**

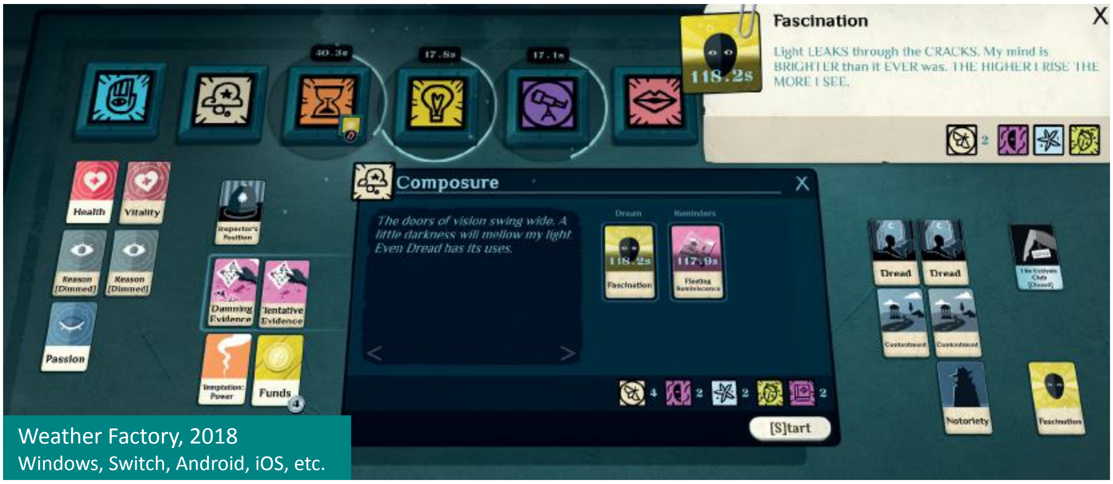


Equipment you craft offers special skills and resistances that become more and more important as you reach the endgame



As you track down monsters and slay them, you'll learn more about their behaviour, weak points and breakable body parts

Cultist Simulator


Fascination

Light LEAKS through the CRACKS. My mind is BRIGHTER than it EVER was. THE HIGHER I RISE THE MORE I SEE.

Composure

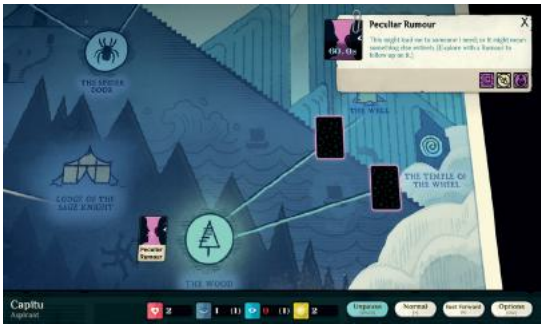
The doors of vision swing wide. A little darkness will mellow my light. Even Dread has its uses.

Weather Factory, 2018
Windows, Switch, Android, iOS, etc.

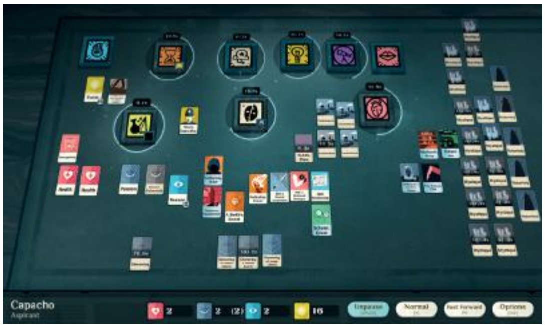
It's a well-known fact in horror cinema: the less you show, the stronger the effect. As long as possible, it's better to suggest than reveal. No visual effect can beat the spectator's imagination. This is even more true for Lovecraftian lore, as indescribable powers cannot – by definition – be described.

This lesson also applies to videogames, to some degree, and *Cultist Simulator* doesn't even try to describe anything. A new game faces the player with a bunch of cards, along with a few "slots", where cards are processed. Really basic cards, at that: just a name and a sketchy image. This simplicity is key. The cards are so vague they might represent anything: an object, a state, or somebody. Or a feeling, or something even less precise.

Cultist Simulator **was crowdfunded in September 2017, raising £82,033.**



Although there are several starting points, they all converge quickly onto the same configuration, making failing and restarting feel very repetitive after a while



Cards represent many things; some can be resources, others might be attributes, NPCs, mental states, items, ideas, etc. – figuring them out is part of the game

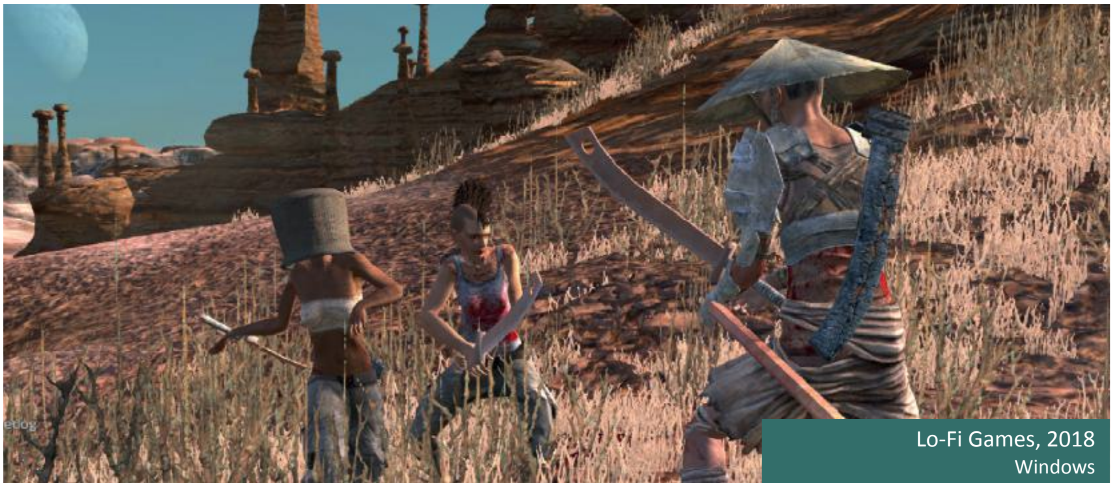
The first cards are easily understood (Funds); the next ones are often left to the player's imagination (A Furtive Truth) or are completely abstract (Way: The Wood). Some are only fleeting; others stay on the table. They are the basic syntax of elusive semantics, which will never be made absolutely clear.

Put a Health card in the Work slot, and you'll get a Fund card. The Health is now depleted, and it cannot be used for the next minute. Sometimes you'll get a Wound as well, which has to be taken care of. This looks simple, but not all combinations are this obvious. There is no tutorial, not even a goal — at first. *Cultist Simulator* is the kind of game where the main goal is to discover the goal of the game itself. It's up to the player to try a few things, fall into a few traps. For instance how to avoid or get rid of the terrible feeling of Fear, which feeds Anxiety and puts an end to the first games.

There is really not much more than that to *Cultist Simulator*, but it works. Even better, this primitive system sits perfectly with the atmosphere of the game. The player won't see it at first, knocking blindly at mysterious doors. But all of a sudden, the Cult is in motion. By force or time, the player manages to open new places, new locations; each time, the excitement of discovering something new is quickly replaced by the desire to always know more. The Mystery is the game itself, and the cultist player happily sacrifices a few hours of his life to try to figure it out.

Of course, such a tight connection between semantics and syntax has its downside: that the former can be left aside. In the long run, many actions have to be repeated over and over. It is then easy to forget what they represent and to act mechanically in response. This mind-numbing repetition of actions isn't exactly fun – yet, by losing meaning, you're mimicking once again the cultist who loses his sanity. **LB**

Kenshi



Lo-Fi Games, 2018
Windows

Kenshi is brutal. You begin in a random location, with no equipment, no objectives, no friends and no perspective at all. You're not the mighty hero, just a random scumbag, and you need to survive. How are you gonna do it? Well, it's up to you. The game offers no quests or end-game objective. There is no victory. The world of *Kenshi* is a reward on its own.

The setting is described as "sword-punk" and was inspired by Japanese tales of wandering ronin. Truly, *Kenshi* has a lot of wandering – it's set in a large and detailed low-fantasy island (around 870 km^2), with many different creatures, factions and environments. However, you can just stay in an area forever, it's ok.

Maybe you want to have a bar and serve clients, or work as a city guard. That's fine too. You can run a mine operation, be a scavenger, a thief or a ninja, or run a slave trade business. The possibilities are endless and the game will not push you in any particular direction. Ultimately, it's all about player expression, and *Kenshi* makes sure you are in control.

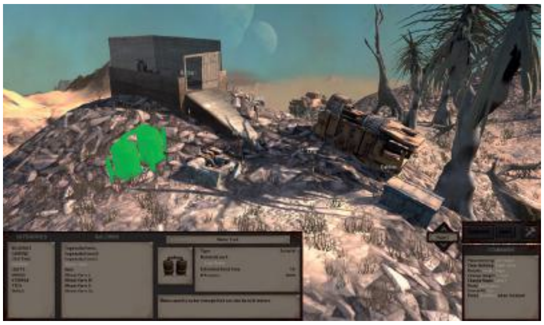
Against you is the whole world. People will want to enslave you, kill you just for fun, eat you, peel your skin (so they can use it as a costume), remove your limbs and other bizarre and brutal things. Anything your character can do, enemies can do as well. Each wound you suffer will take time to heal and will affect the game experience. Your arm is broken? It will impair your combat. Your leg was removed? Somebody will have to carry you until you get a new, mechanical leg. There are no easy shortcuts like magic health potions.

To help you deal with this brutal world, you can have a party of up to 30 characters, and can divide them into squads. You'll have to train them all so they can become effective in the desired skills. Maybe some of them will be mercenaries roaming the world, while others will be farmers, miners or guards for your city.

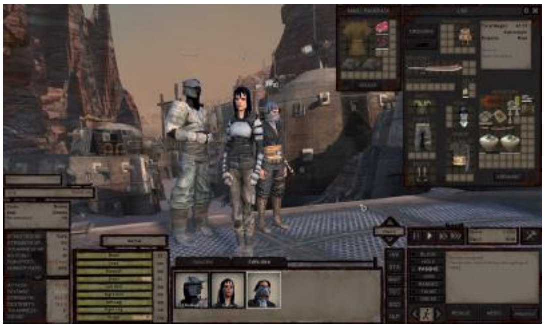
Yes, that's right, you can build a city from scratch, then trade with different factions – and deal with multiple sieges, attacks and attempts at taking your city.

Kenshi's own history is a victory: its development took 12 years, mostly led by a single person, and it shows. Some areas are much more detailed than others, the graphics are outdated and its multiple systems bring dozens of windows and pop-ups that can be overwhelming. The whole game is often frustrating and merciless, and its initial hours of gameplay sometimes are not even fun. You will suffer. A lot. But, if you can endure it and survive the initial moments, there is an amazing experience, like no other RPG in your library. *Kenshi* is brutal. And totally worth it. **VR**

To help with *Kenshi*'s rough edges, there's a strong mod community that has adjusted almost everything in the game. Start with *Dark UI* and *Reactive World*, then add others as you learn the game.



To allow the player to manage multiple squads and one (or more) cities, *Kenshi* has a robust automation system: you can queue action loops, such as mining ore, making metal plates, forging katanas and then storing them



Each of *Kenshi*'s characters has a race, subrace, four main attributes, 29 skills and a hunger meter; there's no HP, as a character's health is based on the overall condition of their body parts

GuJian 3

Aurogon, 2018
Windows

All three *GuJian* games are available on Steam, but *GuJian 3* is the only one that was also released in English and Japanese.

There used to be a topic that frequently appeared on Chinese gaming forums before 2018: is China able to make its own AAA games? Although "triple-A" games are heavily criticised by many, there is still an eagerness from players for big single-player games created solely by Chinese companies to emerge and succeed. What's interesting is that this question began to gradually disappear after 2018, the year that *GuJian 3* was released.

The GuJian series began in 2010, after developers from the highly successful *Sword and Fairy 4* (2007) created their own studio, Aurogon. Released in 2010, *GuJian 1* has been highly praised for having brilliant world-building, solid character development, a moving story, and challenging turn-based combat – with the caveat that the plot moves at a very slow pace.

For the sequel, *GuJian 2* (2013), the developers proved their strong ambition by abandoning the turn-based combat in favour of real-time battles. The storytelling was greatly enhanced, by many hour-long cutscenes – which are, on the other hand, criticised by many as overly long and tedious. After finishing all the DLCs, Aurogon spent three whole years working on the third game in the series, and the result is even more satisfying than its predecessors.

GuJian 3 has several mini-games, such as a *Monopoly* clone, 3D puzzles like those in *Captain Toad,* and a card game based on characters and events from *GuJian 1* and *2*

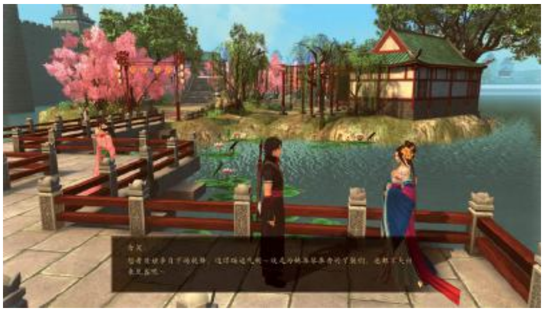
While *GuJian 3* saw the series achieve a high-quality visual presentation, other parts aren't polished enough for it to be considered a real "triple-A". Still, it's enough to provide a sense of what a Chinese AAA game might look like. Though local tech giants have created beautiful visuals in MMOs, it's the first time people have seen such high quality models and rendering of eastern elements in a single-player game. In doing so, *GuJian 3* established high expectations in all RPG players in China, who now believe that the release of "the real one" is just a matter of time.

Plot-wise, *GuJian 3* starts strong, but the tension slowly decreases during the game, then rises a little bit at the end. Xuange, powerful fey king of the Shadowchaser clan, was injured in the battle with the Primal Demon and his days are numbered. His twin brother Beiluo, our protagonist, was raised in the human realm and is forced to inherit the throne.

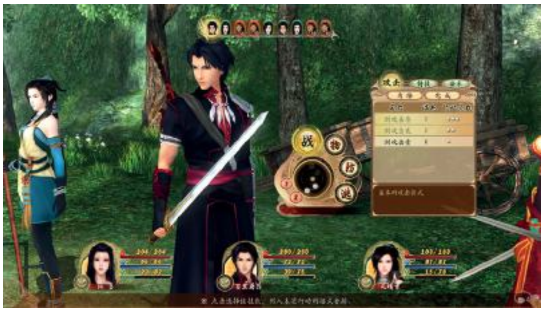
Reluctant, Beiluo refuses at first, but one thing leads to another as he gradually begins to realise his responsibility and discover the power inherited from his bloodline. And so he and Yun'wuyue, a four-thousand-year-old fey, depart together for the human world, in search of ways to resist the demon invasion.

The plot has little to do with the first and second entries' and is thus friendly to newcomers. The only advantage for those who have actually played previous titles is in the card mini-game, Lost Tales, that uses characters, events and locations from *GuJian 1* and *2*. It's one of the most elegant ways I've seen to motivate players to learn more about the previous titles.

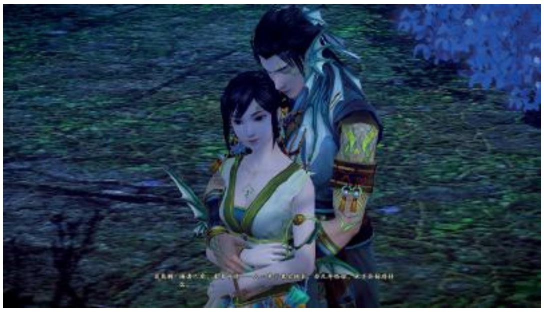
Similarly, though *GuJian 3* follows a theme of heritage, the series itself had three completely different core combat system designs, one for each entry. Here you control only Beilou, in a third-person action-RPG combat system similar to that of *The Witcher 3*.



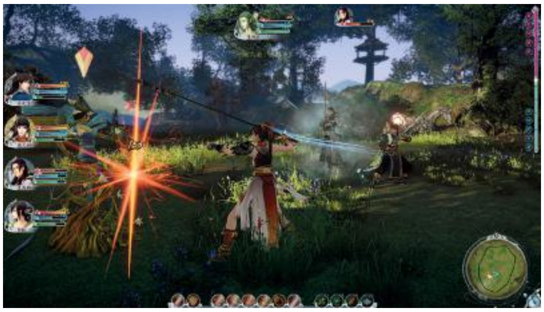
GuJian 1 feels very similar to *Sword and Fairy 4*, with the team using their previous experience to deliver a polished RPG



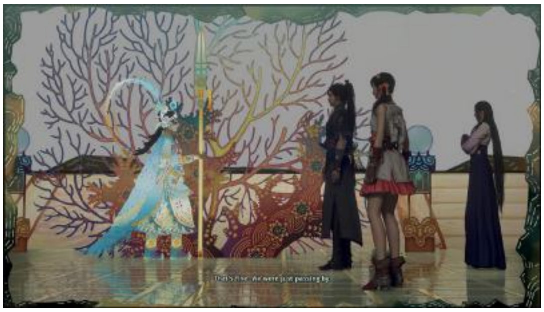
GuJian's combat system is turn-based, as in many JRPGs, but adds action points that allow you to combine attacks



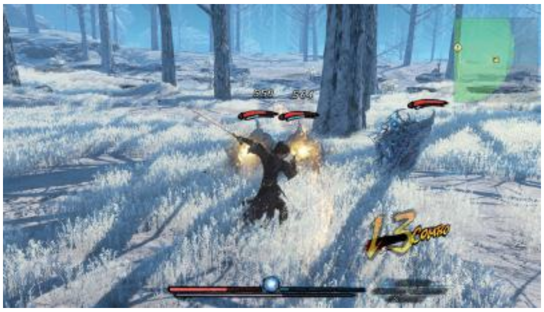
One of *GuJian 2*'s strongest points is its charismatic cast, with romantic stories that evoke Chinese TV dramas



GuJian 2 stands out among Chinese RPGs for having a real-time combat system similar to those of *Dragon Age 2* and *Xenoblade*



There are many cultural references in *GuJian 3,* such as a dream-like palace inspired by Chinese shadow play



GuJian 3 makes the jump to full action-RPG combat, but now you can only control the main character

The warp strike is easily my favourite skill, allowing the player to teleport and strike any enemy in the battlefield instantly, similar to Noctis' warping capability in *Final Fantasy XV*. But dodging might be too strong and enemy behaviours are quite stiff, making some boss battles quickly fall into an "attack -> dodge -> recover stamina" mechanical pattern.

The world setting and story of *GuJian 3* doesn't exactly fall into any pre-defined category in the wuxia or xianxia genre spectrum. It incorporates local mythology and legends, combined with ancient Chinese history, to create its own lore. As a Chinese myself, I have to look into many books and articles to fully understand most of these cultural symbols, so I would assume some barriers might exist for people from other cultures.

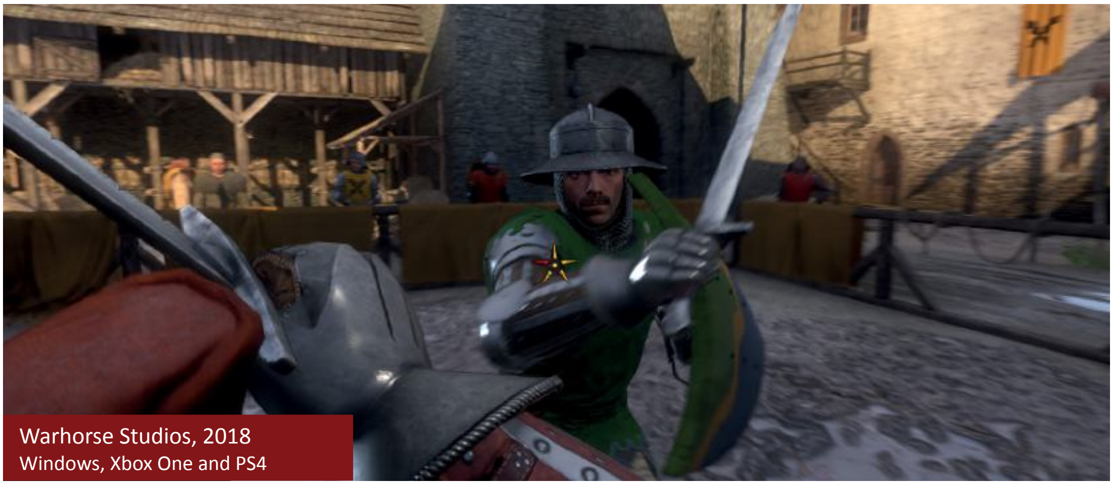
But I remembered when I first got to know *Dungeons & Dragons* as a child – I tried to read about the mythology and history of the medieval west to find the origins of those worlds and monsters, and enjoyed this research very much. I could imagine *GuJian 3* providing similar fun for western players fascinated by all the new stuff from a completely different culture.

We see hints of Chinese CRPGs rising these days, bringing fresh air to the industry, and *GuJian 3* has proved to be a good start. For me, I'm looking forward to not only China, but all countries, making their own games, telling their own stories, and bringing their special understanding of gaming to the whole community.

I am eagerly awaiting more chances to experience a joy like that of my first encounter with *D&D* – or like your first encounter with Chinese CRPGs. **LU**

Besides the three main games, there is also a *GuJian* MMORPG, released in 2018. It was translated as *Sword of Legends Online*.

Kingdom Come: Deliverance



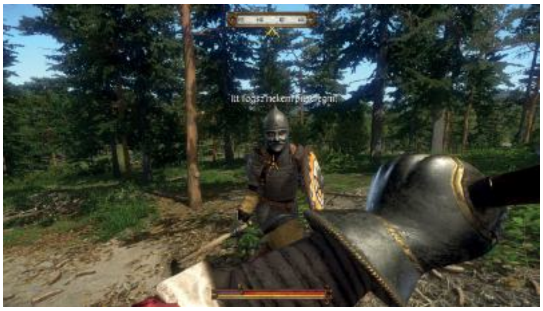
Warhorse Studios, 2018
Windows, Xbox One and PS4

A few years ago, perusing the “bible” for the show *Star Trek*, I was quite surprised to find that the producers of that program had a rule for their writing: authenticity over accuracy. Meaning that if you’re going to tell stories week after week you have to build a consistent world that feels believable more than it does realistic. Much ink has been spilled about *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*’s historical accuracy, but very little gets said in regard to its strong dedication to authenticity.

***KC:D* was crowd-funded on Kickstarter in 2014. While it was originally intended as a proof of concept to investors, with a modest goal of £300,000, the campaign ended up raising over 2 million dollars.**

Set in Bohemia in 1403, the world of *Kingdom Come* is a backwater fiefdom. While parts of it will seem familiar to those who consume historical and fantasy media, much of it will come as a complete surprise. The first thing to know, however, is that *Kingdom Come* is not a Bethesda game, even though it will certainly fool some people … at first.

For starters, there is no character creation. Instead, you play Henry, a young man with no skills. That’s a literal statement, not hyperbole. Speech options are blunt, usually with you insulting anyone you try to ply with your silver tongue. Henry can’t beat anyone in a fight unless they’re at least as terrible as he is, and he can’t even read – books in the game will not be readable by the player, either, until you pay someone to teach you how to read.



KC:D’s combat is focused on 1:1 duels; you can attack in six different zones, trying to get past the enemy’s weapon and wear them out so you can actually damage them

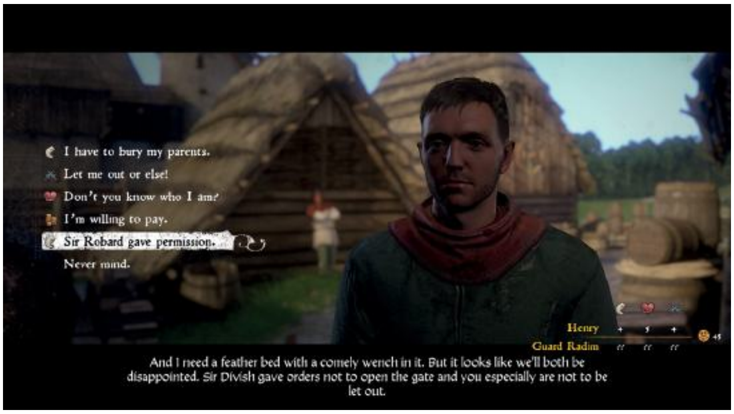
While this means that the beginning is fairly difficult, you’ll pick up the basic levels of every skill quickly – harvesting a few herbs early on will boost the related skill, for example. But it also means you won’t instantly go raiding dungeons and killing bandits. This isn’t a fantasy game. Not only are there almost no areas in the game that would function as traditional dungeons but, as a lowly peasant, getting weapons and armour is not as simple as just picking a direction right out of the tutorial and going where you like. You could do that, but then you would need to steal those items – using skills that you need to develop first.

The game is very lenient to those following through the main quest, however. Henry might often be insolent to his noble betters – calling the young heir a spoiled brat – but the game’s NPCs will simply tell you what the regular consequences of such actions are, not visiting said consequences upon you. That doesn’t mean you can get away with everything, and you will still spend time in prison for committing crimes.

Once you begin the game proper, the world fully opens up and you can start to level up your skills and do quests. But, again, this is not a fantasy RPG. The game’s quests focus on authenticity, feeling almost alien after decades playing through tropey and samey quests. These are some of the most memorable and interesting quests available in RPGs, often requiring detective work from the player and offering multiple solutions and outcomes based on your performance.

A personal favourite was a quest to find heretics – instantly conjuring up the idea of demon-worshipping, human-sacrificing monsters, something reinforced by the alarmist priest seeking your help. Instead, you’ll find that “heretic” means the same as it does in real life – someone who believes in something different from the established religious dogma.

> "I was a little bit afraid at first. I worried that we would not have enough ideas for side-quests. Can we really do 50 quests based in medieval villages without monsters? It turns out, we can. We have more ideas for quests than we can use and I think they are interesting, more so than in other RPGs."
>
> *– Daniel Vávra, co-founder of Warhorse Studios*



I have to bury my parents.
Let me out or else!
Don't you know who I am?
I'm willing to pay.
Sir Robard gave permission.
Never mind.

Henry
Guard Radim

And I need a feather bed with a comely wench in it. But it looks like we'll both be disappointed. Sir Divish gave orders not to open the gate and you especially are not to be let out.

Dialogues allow you to use your speech skill, money, social status or physical power to persuade others; things like your reputation and clothes are also factored in

Another personal favourite involved investigating and breaking up a coin counterfeiting operation, based entirely on how people in the middle ages would do it.

But don't think for a second this game is the experience of a tedious history lecture, that Warhorse forgot to include fun and released a dry and somewhat dull product – this couldn't be farther from the truth.

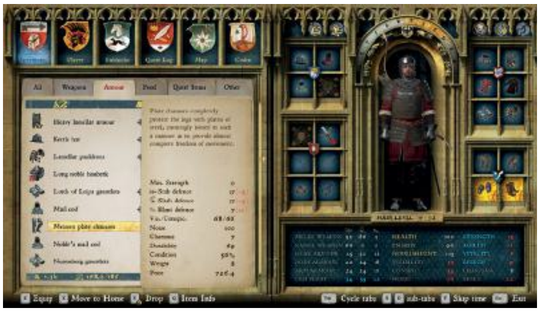
Henry is not a generic blank slab for you to project yourself onto – he's a bit of a lad, and the tone of *KC:D* expertly does deep seriousness and comedic silliness many times throughout the side and main quests in the game. You will go on drinking benders, then steal wine to keep the party going in separate quests. You will drop psychedelics and party with "witches" and much more. I found myself chuckling along at many of the humorous surprises the game throws at you, and very invested in the more serious stuff.

The biggest elephant in the room is the combat. *KC:D*'s combat is focused around medieval fighting manuals – if you have ever seen footage of HEMA – Historical European Martial Arts – then you'll have a good understanding. In a genre where most melee weapons function like lightsabers, passing through enemies and assigning damage based on numbers, *KC:D*'s combat tries for something different and much more realistic.

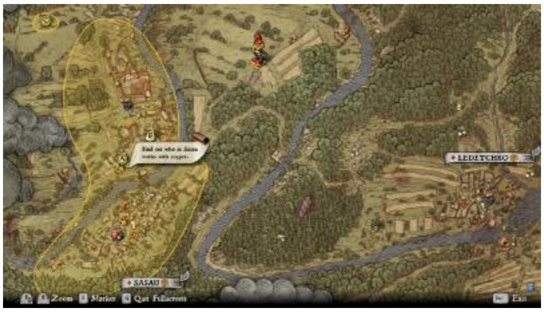
That's not to mean that *KC:D*'s combat is very punishing, but it does require patience. You will need to feint, block, parry, slam into an enemy to knock them off their guard, etc. – otherwise you will simply be slowly taken apart by any encounter. And there's no pausing to instantly drink 30 health potions.

That doesn't mean there aren't potions – one of many concessions to the videogame medium – but they are something you must prepare beforehand. And the strict save system means you can't save constantly, so it's important to always be prepared, have well-kept equipment and good fencing skills. It's an imperfect system – combos are worthless, for example – but it's a rare attempt to actually have sword-fighting in games that tries to be like the real thing, and one hopes that further development of this concept is coming in future releases, because it certainly has potential.

All of this, in this world, feels real. It has an authenticity that hasn't been seen in CRPGs since *Morrowind*. It truly feels like a realised and somewhat alien world – you won't feel right at home coming here from watching *Lord of the Rings* or *Game of Thrones*, or from playing *Skyrim* and *Oblivion* – it will feel like those things in some small ways, but in many, many others, it will feel like something completely different – and truly excellent. **CAK**

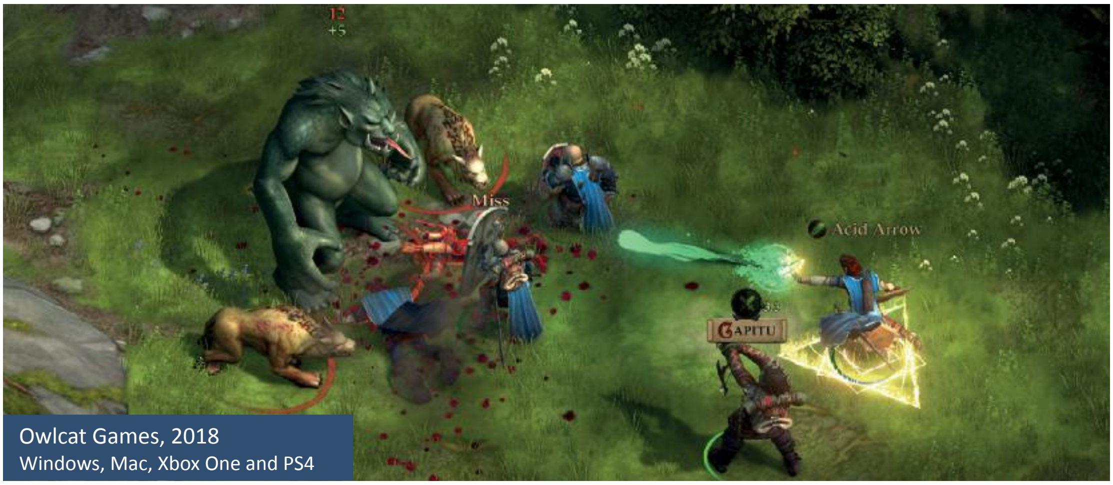


Despite having no races, classes or spells, *KC:D* has a rich character system, with many stats, skills, perks and layers of armour



While the map helps track objectives, many of the quests require following rumours and investigating large areas for clues

Pathfinder: Kingmaker



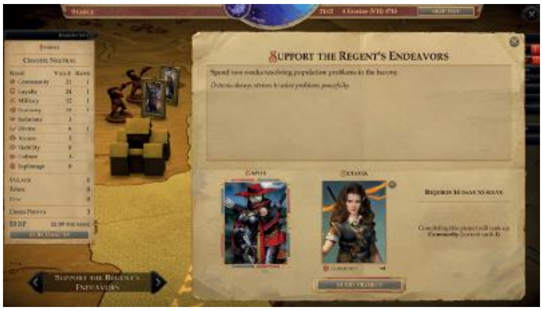
Owlcat Games, 2018
Windows, Mac, Xbox One and PS4

Pathfinder: Kingmaker **was crowdfunded in 2017, raising $909,057. Its sequel, *Wrath of the Righteous*, raised $2,054,339 in 2020.**

Kingmaker begins at a high-society party, where the host declares a competition: the one who is able to take back the mysterious and wild Stolen Lands shall be proclaimed as baron of the newly established kingdom. After a few incidents, the guests split into two groups – led by the player character and a rival – with possible party members choosing their leader based on your choices. Following a few more tutorial sequences and clashes, the winner takes over the land. But, even then, the best is yet to come.

In *Pathfinder: Kingmaker* you're on an epic journey – both as an adventurer and as a ruler. There's the classic CRPG party-based exploration of a huge hand-made world filled with settlements, dungeons, forests, ambushes and random encounters, as well as a lot of throne-bound decision-making. In contrast to many similar games, both of these parts are interesting. You can spend six hours straight venturing through swamps and dungeons, and then sit back for another six hours looking after your adorable but unstable barony.

Kingmaker was made by Owlcat Games, a studio led mostly by former employees of Nival Interactive, which was responsible for early Russian strategy/RPG *Rage of Mages* (1998), its 3D successor *Evil Islands* (2001), the cult classic tactical gem *Silent Storm* (2003) and *Heroes of Might & Magic V* (2005).


Chaotic Neutral
Support the Regent's Endeavors
Support the Regent's Endeavors

The kingdom management aspect has multiple layers, from selecting advisors and dealing with requests to managing buildings and expanding your influence

Kickstarted by the studio in 2017, *Kingmaker* is based on the *Kingmaker* campaign, a collection of six adventure books for the *Pathfinder* tabletop RPG – a popular alternative to the *Dungeons & Dragons* rules.

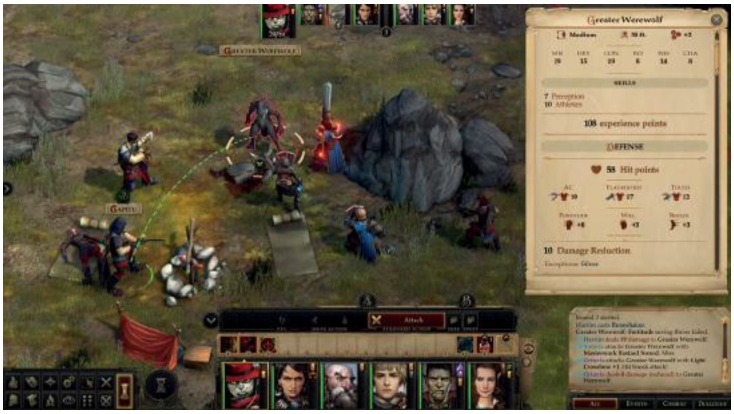
Kingmaker the videogame follows the same overall structure as the books: after taking control of the Stolen Lands, you'll have to resolve many different problems in your kingdom. Some of the situations can be solved from the throne with the help of your advisors, but many of them will require your personal involvement. People of the land will come to the baron to seek help, find missing relatives, lift curses and, basically, get the law enforced manually.

While in the capital city, your party members take their seats as advisors. Some tasks can be solved by just appointing the right advisor to a problem he can solve. For example, the regent will address the general problems of your fellow citizens, while the high priest will deal with cases related to religion.

Most of the time the trick is to find the right NPC and put them into the right governing position. Here, as well, your followers will show their personalities, which is important because the methods of a priest with dark suicidal thoughts will heavily differ from those of an enthusiastic and upbeat cleric. Sometimes the game allows you to interfere with your advisor's job, and your choice whether to do it or to let the advisor make his own decision will also affect your party relations.

While the main story is a traditional (although possibly evil) high-fantasy adventure combined with a dialogue-based city builder, the tiny side stories are just as good, and sometimes extremely intriguing. Every location feels alive and has something to offer – a treasure surrounded by a dangerous, mysterious, humorous or even confusing circumstances; some pleasant puzzles; or a scratch of a bigger story.

> “Two of our main goals were to expand the pen-and-paper experience in CRPGs, and to revive the great old-school, hardcore CRPG experience, the one we grew up on ourselves. While we succeeded at it and received good feedback from the hardcore audience, we understand that the huge *Pathfinder* system ruleset was left tricky and unclear in many ways for the new players unfamiliar with the tabletop game”
>
> *– Alexander Mishulin, Owlcats’s Creative Director*



Kingmaker was released with a real-time with pause combat system, similar to that of *Baldur’s Gate*, but also got a turn-based mode with its *Definitive Edition* in 2020

Every dialogue – be it related to the main quest or to a seemingly easy side task – can potentially turn into an unpredicted scandal or even massacre. *Kingmaker*’s social aspect allows you to role-play as few RPGs do, a call back to all those nights spent in classic *Fallout* and *Arcanum* games. Imagine *Planescape: Torment*’s dynamic alignment system set on maximum – that’s what we’re talking about in *Kingmaker*.

Your party members contribute a lot to it. During adventures, your companions often comment on what is going on around them, and react to everything important, be it a decision to accept a man-eating troll king as your liege, or sparing the life of a bandit in exchange for a share of what he earns stealing.

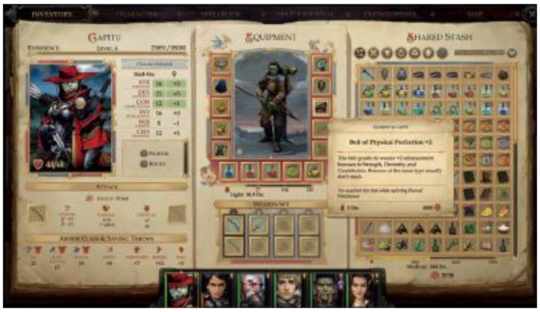
All this freedom comes at a price. To enjoy the game in full measure you will have to basically learn the entire *Pathfinder* ruleset while you play – every little button or spell description must be read carefully and digested, or you will fail without even knowing what you did wrong. Prepare yourself for a two-hour-long character creation, and be sure to comprehend what every class, stat, feat, spell and mechanic is about.

Nowhere is that more evident than in the game’s combat. *Kingmaker* tries to follow *Baldur’s Gate* in balancing between complexity and role-playing fun, but fails due to its extremely high entry threshold.

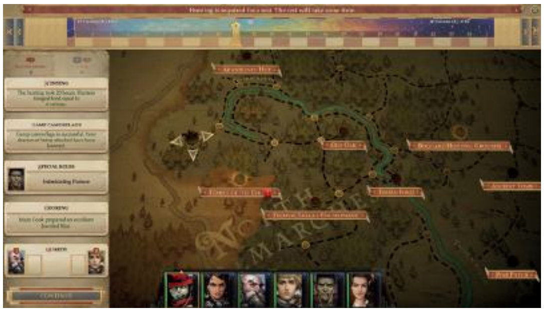
Even if you manage to navigate character creation and make a decent character, you still have to prepare for a massive bestiary that will employ every trick in the book to destroy you. While many of these lead to memorable battles that allow you to fully employ the game’s rich systems, others require specific approaches that may be unclear or simply not available to you. In a tabletop RPG, the game master would handle these situations, but here you are left entirely on your own.

This led to issues like the game being review-bombed on release for not explaining to newcomers that a swarm of little spiders is immune to sword attacks but vulnerable to fire spells and throwable flasks. There are several moments where you might get stuck or waste hours backtracking, and that’s *Kingmaker*’s biggest problem – not difficulty per se, but the frustration of losing time and progress due to design flaws.

Right now, Owlcat Games is busy making the indirect sequel, *Pathfinder: Wrath of the Righteous* (2021), which met its Kickstarter goal in less than three days. That says a lot. While so many CRPG fans want to make *Pathfinder* bigger, richer and more glorious, it’s in the hands of the devs to make it more accessible too. *Kingmaker* certainly deserves more fame than it got, and I’m sure there’s a bright future for the whole *Pathfinder* universe in videogames. **PS**



The game’s interface is gorgeous and does its best to handle all the information, but it can get pretty overwhelming sometimes



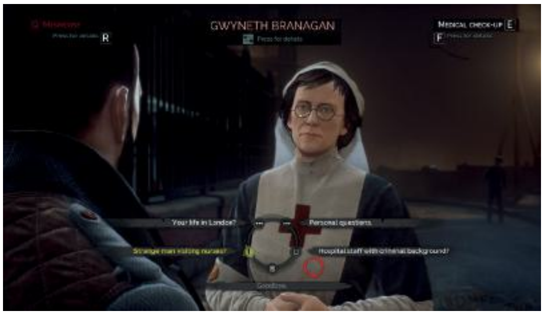
The world map is presented as a board you travel across, filled with many areas, encounters, ambushes and brief CYOA events

Vampyr

Dontnod Entertainment, 2018
Windows, PS4, Xbox One and Switch

The clash between delivering a novel experience and accommodating audiences via familiarity is as old as art itself. Some ignore one aspect altogether in favour of the other, but others try to strike a balance. Unfortunately, *Vampyr* stands as a textbook example of why you can't "nickel & dime" creativity.

Superficially, things look quite promising. A lot of high-quality environmental art was created to bring this decrepit version of London to life. There are times when the cello and electronic music stings combine with the murky streets to create some truly admirable aesthetic moments. Likewise, there are some well-executed genre tropes regarding haughty nobles and the kind-hearted downtrodden, moments that show the people of this age and their societal ills.


GWYNETH BRANAGAN
Your life in London?
Personal questions
Strange man visiting nurses?
Hospital staff with criminal background?
Goodbye

Jonathan can help and cure citizens, or kill them to become stronger; the more you learn about them, the more XP you get if you decide to kill them

Outside of where important NPCs live, the streets are filled with endless groups of humans and monsters to be killed without any consequence

However, a few poignant aesthetic moments and sporadic sharp dialogues do not a cult classic make, and all of it is mere stylish distraction which cannot hide the lack of substance.

The core of *Vampyr* is based on using the protagonist as a framing device for the conflict between player convenience and moral integrity. Jonathan Reid is a veteran doctor who returns home towards the tail end of WW1 only to find an influenza-stricken London teetering on the brink of collapse. His homecoming is cut short by an attack which inflicts vampirism upon him, setting up his quest of moonlighting as a medic while trying to find a cure for his condition.

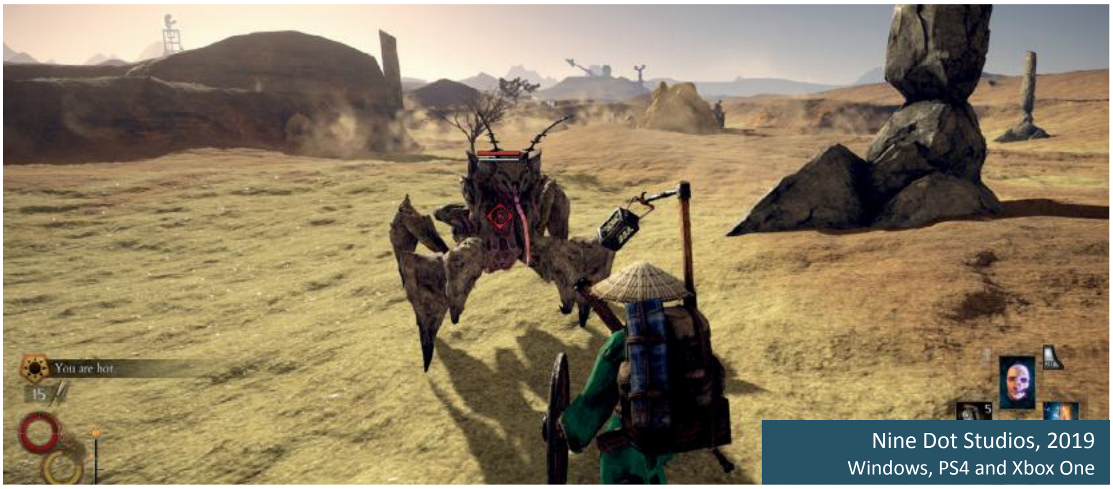
Thus, Jonathan is constantly tempted to feed on patients, who provide the most significant available increase in power. This dilemma is contextualized by a social system that keeps track of every NPC and offers clues that can be discovered regarding their vices and virtues. However, this is woefully mismatched with the rest of the game, in which every aspect of the gameplay serves a mediocre-at-best combat system.

As an RPG, *Vampyr* is all about how you customise your murder abilities. To say that non-combat abilities are sorely missed would be an understatement. This is a game choked by generic conventions, such as nameless respawning mobs that exist outside the social system.

Put simply, for 80% of its length *Vampyr* plays as a generic action RPG. What should feel like a drama about haunted supernatural creatures, such as *Interview with the Vampire*, actually ends up more like the leather-clad dark superhero fantasy of the *Underworld* series.

Overall, *Vampyr* is one of the most conceptually interesting recent RPGs, but ends practically toothless due to the lack of commitment to the social system and the thematic questions that are asked by its premise. **LL**

Outward



Nine Dot Studios, 2019
Windows, PS4 and Xbox One

Outward is a surprising game. It's open-world, but the map doesn't show where you are – let alone quest markers. It's an action RPG, but there are no levels or experience. And, most surprising of all, it's a game from 2019 with a split-screen mode straight from the '90s. After character creation, without attributes, skills or classes, the game shows a few slides of backstory and leaves you shipwrecked on a beach. Welcome to *Outward*.

You start in a small sandbox tutorial with no hand-holding, a few niche skills, and no equipment worth a damn. Your skills and equipment, combined with only eight quick-slot buttons, will define your style of play. More skills can be obtained through special NPCs, and better items through crafting and exploration. Some of these have heavy trade-offs – a large backpack will slow you down, and unlocking mana requires sacrificing HP. The story is simple and straightforward. You are not the hero of some ancient prophecy. In fact, you are just five days and 150 silver pieces away from becoming homeless. And if you fail? You lose your home and the game moves on. What the story lacks in presentation, it makes up with consequences.

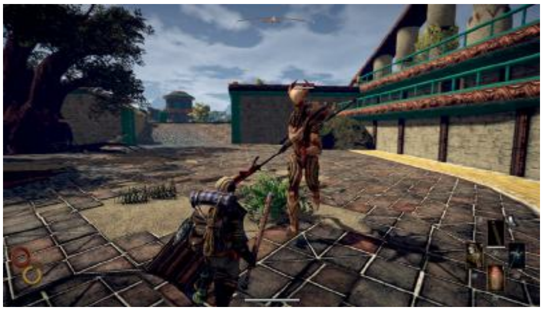
In the process of forestalling your impending homelessness, you will quickly run into something trying to kill you. And where one bandit is manageable, two can get you running for your life. If you are defeated, a scenario will play out justifying how you survived. You then wake up somewhere else – likely bruised and starving – and move on. There are no saves to reload; you have to roll with the punches. This permanence of mistakes turns the combat from a trial of execution and reflexes into one of preparation and planning.

Looting bandits will prove a poor way of making a living and it won't be long until you find yourself exploring the game's first region in search of treasure.

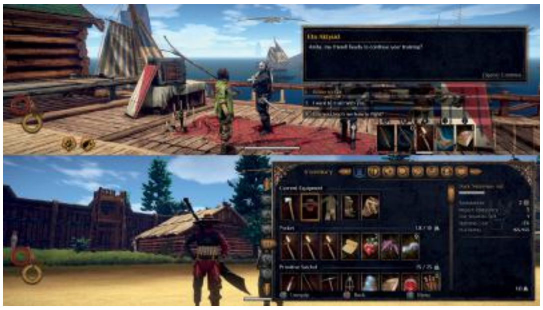
And this is likely when you'll know if *Outward* is for you. With a map that doesn't show your location and no means of fast travel, travelling is the game's most divisive feature. When it works, the long stretches of walking punctuated by the amazing soundtrack will satisfy those yearning for a sense of survival and adventure. But for players expecting a new interaction in every corner, "hours of backtracking through empty areas" will feel like a more apt description.

In the end, *Outward* is unlike most RPGs and much of the game is likely to either charm or annoy you – the perception of which lies in the eye of the beholder. But if it charms you, you're in for a fresh and unique experience that adds up to more than the sum of its parts. Especially in co-op. **MUT**

***Outward* has two DLCs: *The Soroboreans* adds a fourth faction to the game, while *The Three Brothers* adds more survival elements, like base-building.**

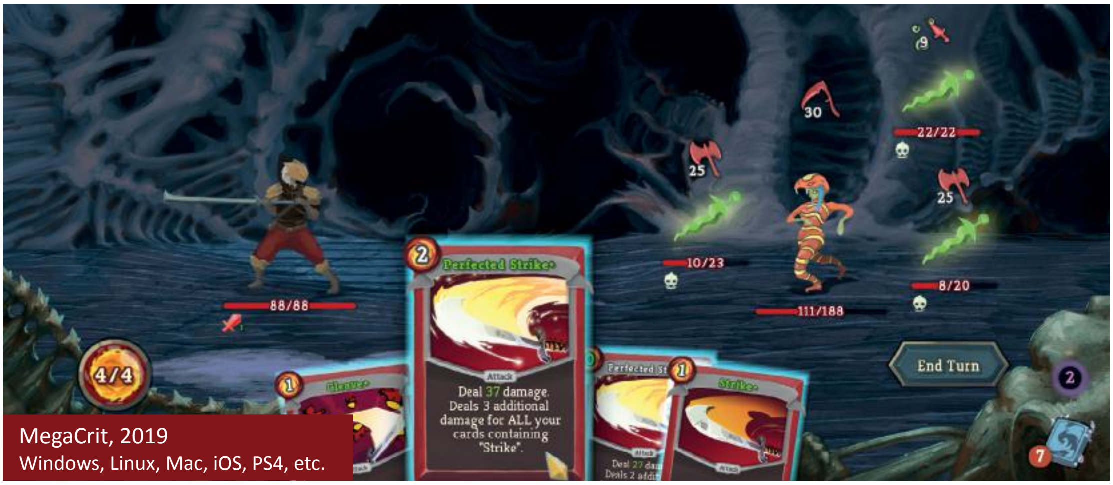


The combat feels like that of *Dark Souls*, but more focused on the survival aspect; dealing with the environment, with status effects and with the trade-offs of carrying armour, large backpacks, lanterns, etc.



With no XP or levels, the game's progression is based around joining factions, getting better equipment and learning new skills from trainers

Slay the Spire



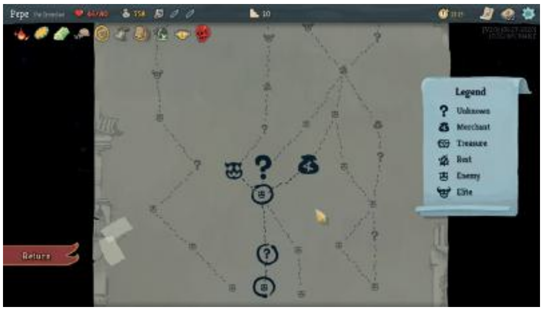
MegaCrit, 2019
Windows, Linux, Mac, iOS, PS4, etc.

***Slay the Spire* was released in late 2017 on Steam's Early Access and became a hit among streamers, selling over a million units before its full release in January 2019.**

First released into Steam's Early Access in 2017, *Slay the Spire* married Roguelite mechanics to the deck-building concept popularised in the tabletop realm by games like *Dominion*. In each run, players choose one of four classes and try to make it to the top of the mysterious Spire. A deck of cards takes the place of a traditional RPG character sheet, representing the class' skills, abilities and weapons.

There are two halves to a *Spire* run: the overworld section and combat encounters. The overworld is a node-based map, inspired by the sector map in *FTL* (2012). These nodes are usually battles, but can also be events, treasure chests containing relics, shops that sell cards and other upgrades, or campsites where players can recover a portion of their HP or permanently enhance a single card. The map occasionally branches into multiple paths, which players must choose between. Each of the game's three acts takes place on its own map, and each act ends in a boss fight.

Combat is where all the deck-building decisions are put to the test. In each round, five cards are drawn; players can play any number of them, so long as they can meet the cards' energy costs (characters start with three energy by default). Card effects vary wildly, but at a basic level the game is about balancing defensive play with offensive output.



The overworld section allows you to pick a starting path and plan ahead based on upcoming encounters, as well as occasionally decide which branch to follow

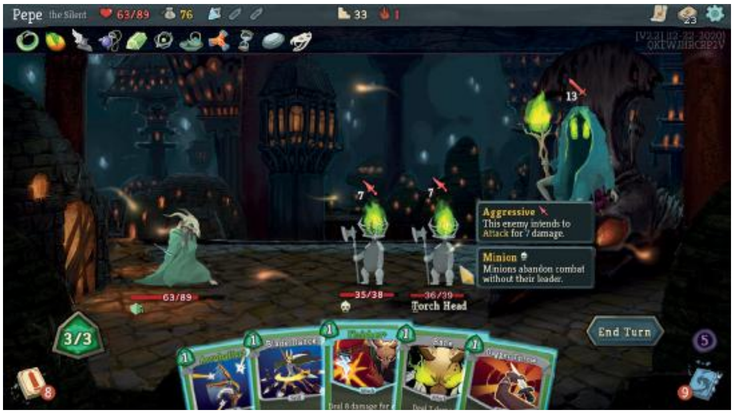
Enemies indicate their intentions before acting: a sword symbol means they're going to attack (their exact damage shown by a number), a shield means defend, a purple swirl means they're preparing to hit you with a status effect, etc. After a player finishes their turn, the enemies act, any unused cards in the player's hand are discarded, and a new round begins.

This simple loop becomes increasingly elaborate as additional cards are acquired. After each battle, the player has the option to add new cards to their deck. These choices are mainly drawn from a catalogue of 75 class-specific cards, but 56 "colourless" cards turn up in events and shops, and 14 "curse" cards can be inflicted on a deck through various means. Of course, as in any tabletop deck-builder, removing cards can be just as important as adding new ones; opportunities to do this are rare, coming erratically through random events or shop purchases at increasingly steep prices.

MegaCrit co-founder Anthony Giovannetti comes from the *Android: Netrunner* card game scene. *Netrunner*'s focus on flavourful, asymmetrical factions finds a parallel in *Spire*'s class card sets. Each class starts with a basic deck, comprised mainly of rudimentary attack and defence options, alongside a few more advanced cards that indicate a class' particular specialties and suggest directions in which the deck can be built. These inherent possibilities are further enhanced by relics, which are non-card items acquired through questing that provide passive benefits.

Each class favours certain overarching tactics, implied by its card set and internalised over time through repeated playthroughs; for example, the wizard-like Defect likes to specialise in one of several elemental magics. But the random elements brought about by the Roguelite DNA ensure that every deck, even when it adheres to familiar strategies, feels unique.

> "Allowing for combos and strong synergies is definitely a hallmark of our design process. In general, we believe in rewarding player mastery, and as a card-game player myself, I know the sheer joy when your deck comes together and feels like a well-oiled Rube Goldberg machine. Since we are a single player card game, we don't have to worry about the typical downside of strong combos – where the opponent feels bad because of an overpowered strategy."
>
> *– Anthony Giovannetti,*
> Slay the Spire*'s Designer*



Aggressive
This enemy intends to Attack for 7 damage.

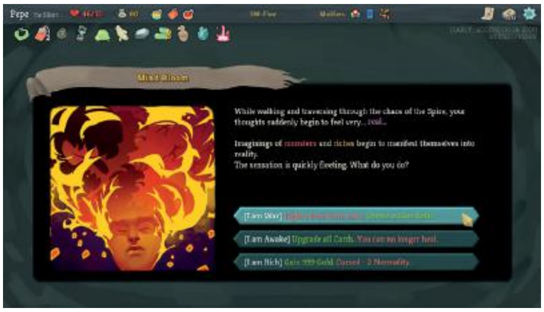
Minion
Minions abandon combat without their leader.

The Roguelite nature of *Slay the Spire* means that it's not afraid of presenting enemies with mechanics that can destroy a poorly-built deck; its design pushes players to improve over multiple tries

As they tinker with and streamline their deck, the player must also pay attention to the overworld map, timing visits to shops, campsite respites and mini-boss encounters to maximise their benefits and minimise risks. By the end of a run, the deck becomes an elaborate, personalised machine, capable of churning out absurd damage, blocking most if not all attacks, cycling through its entire contents in a single turn, and similar feats of cartomancy that would be summarily banned in a competitive tabletop setting, but are a puzzlish delight in a single player experience. *Slay the Spire* encourages you to break it at every turn.

Spire has an acknowledged predecessor in *Dream Quest* (2014), but its higher production values and slicker interface set the template for what is now indisputably a genre unto itself.

Inspired by *Spire*'s success, new deck-building Roguelites now crop up on a regular basis, but *Spire* itself remains unchallenged. The core of its success lies in its mapping of the deck-building conceit onto the classic language of RPGs. And the 75-card catalogue for each class is tight enough to feel distinct, but big enough to allow expressive play. The significance of every card added is immediately palpable. *Spire* compresses the experience of creating and levelling up a character into an airtight, seamless 90-minute run.



While walking and traversing through the chaos of the Spire, your thoughts suddenly begin to feel very... real...

Imaginings of monsters and riches begin to manifest themselves into reality.
The sensation is quickly fleeting. What do you do?

[I am War]
[I am Awake] Upgrade all Cards. You can no longer heal.
[I am Rich] Gain 999 Gold. Cursed - 2 Normality

Event nodes in the overworld lead to short scenes in which you make choices that provide new cards, upgrades, relics or curses

Importantly too, the game's superlative balance means that, almost always, there are ways to save a bad run. A single powerful card or relic papers over a lot of flaws, and can open a route to possible victory. Even when things don't come together, failure has its own fascination and drama. It can be just as exciting to pilot a bad deck as far as you can as it is to liquidise everything in your path with an overpowered one.

After players find their footing and begin to accrue wins regularly, Ascension levels can modify runs with added challenges, and there's a hidden "true" ending, with accompanying hyper-difficult final boss, to overcome. Progress towards this boss ties directly into the overarching narrative behind your cyclical runs up the *Spire*. It's a light, fairly inconsequential narrative, albeit one filtered through an excellent, arch, surreal aesthetic.

But the true narrative, the most engaging tale in *Slay the Spire*, is the miniature saga of your deck's development: the accretion of powerful cards, the eventual crystallisation of an overarching strategy, mitigating junk cards, curses and other inevitable dross, moving inexorably towards a win or a loss – and, naturally, impulsively, starting again from the beginning once the tale's been told. **BES**

Mods:

Slay the Spire has a robust modding scene, with dozens of new characters, classes and enemies, easily accessible via the Steam Workshop. Here's a few highlights:

Mod the Spire: A mandatory tool for loading mods.

Downfall Expansion: A fan-made expansion, letting you play as the game's bad guys, with six new playable characters, each with their unique cards and play style.

Replay the Spire: Expands the base game by adding new cards, relics, enemies, bosses and events.

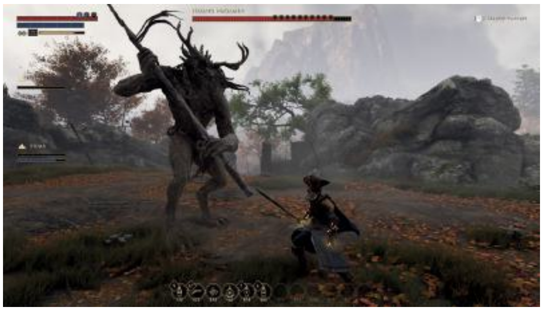
Spire with Friends: Adds multiplayer to the game, allowing for co-op and versus play.

GreedFall

Spiders, 2019
Windows, PS4, Xbox One

I’ve always felt that, with each new game, Spiders heightens its production values and tightens its gameplay mechanics, but also loses more of itself. While it’s always respectfully drawn influence from BioWare, its previous games stood out by taking their presentation-heavy approach into smaller or more dubious settings, lessening the scope to focus on more personal conflicts or tackle subjects that bigger companies paint in broad strokes.

Then enters *GreedFall*, a game seeking to fill the void left by BioWare’s recent absence – a job which it has done well for many people, but one that I found to be lacking, both in BioWare’s scale of presentation and sharp character writing, and Spider’s charming – if sophomoric – darker tone.


The combat is very *Dark Souls*-inspired, but only if you play melee, as guns allow you to ignore most mechanics

While *GreedFall* offers some story choices, the biggest one is whether you’ll do all its numerous and repetitive side-quests to please factions and companions

GreedFall follows three historically-inspired factions as they colonise the island of Teer Fradee, a land mixing elements of America, Ireland, Australia and others on its quest to create an all-encompassing pastiche of these places during the Age of Discovery.

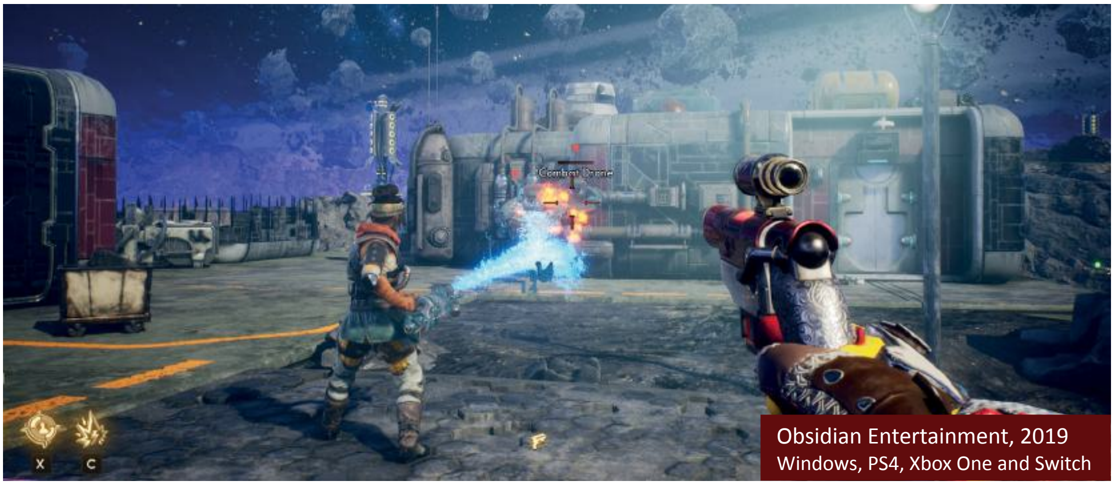
It then gives the conquistadores actual magic and everyone is tripping over one another in the hunt for a cure to a mysterious, seemingly paranormal, plague. The questions of colonialism, politics and identity are gradually dashed in favour of a largely environmentalist tale, which winds up no less unfocused and absurdist.

That’s something which can also be said of the gameplay. The core is an action system in which you fight alongside two companions and can pause to assess the situation. Character-building features the usual warrior/mage/rogue trifecta, but it is so wildly unbalanced in favour of ranged options that the choice becomes one of difficulty selection rather than player expression. And none of these choices affects anything except combat. There is a system of talents, like charisma or vigour, that get checked in dialogue or for doing feats but they are more or less irrelevant, mostly boiling down to fighting fewer mobs or getting better loot.

Things are no better in narrative terms, as there is little payoff or consequence; the vast majority of the time, you are the errand boy of Teer Fradee. This is made worse by the way major story choices are presented based on how many side-quests you finish, instead of whatever limited stances you can take along the way.

Thus, the game feels like a Frankenstein’s monster cobbled together from different genre tropes and player expectations – a sin also present in Spider’s previous games. In *GreedFall* they managed to present a higher quality of polish and the market rewarded them, but in the process they’ve also lost that “je ne sais quoi”, which made for a great underdog. **PFM**

The Outer Worlds



Obsidian Entertainment, 2019
Windows, PS4, Xbox One and Switch

Over a decade after its release, *Fallout: New Vegas* (2010) remains a beloved modern classic, often considered one of the best RPGs ever made. With such a legacy, it is no surprise that Obsidian would seek to repeat the formula, especially given Bethesda's misfires with *Fallout 4* (2015) and *Fallout 76* (2019).

In comes *The Outer Worlds*, a first-person RPG presented in a retro-futuristic aesthetic and set in a dystopian space colony ruled by satirical evil corporations. It's "*Fallout* in space", including the classic combat/stealth/dialogue quest solutions, the option to kill any NPC and even a Vault Boy-like smiling mascot.

The game was led by Leonard Boyarsky and Tim Cain, creators of the original *Fallout* (1997) and founders of Troika. There, they created games like *Arcanum* (2001) and *VtM: Bloodlines* (2004), extremely ambitious but deeply flawed RPGs. For better or worse, *Outer Worlds* is the exact opposite of that – a smaller, more restrained and polished game that is happy simply following in the footsteps of *Fallout: New Vegas*.

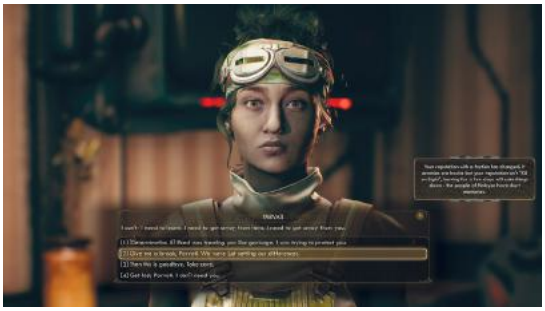
The years since *New Vegas* have allowed for better graphics and more satisfying gunplay, but *Outer Worlds* constantly feels like a game you've played before. It is never bad, but it also never reaches the heights of *New Vegas* or of Obsidian's more flawed gems.

Its scope is a constant issue – it's short for an epic open-world RPG (10–20 hours) but lacks the refinement of smaller games. For example, the combat has a nice weight to it, but the level-scaled loot and limited enemy variety quickly make it all feel easy and repetitive. The character system has multiple dialogue skills, like Persuade, Intimidate and Lie, but they often lead to the same results. Add in quests that rely heavily on fetching or killing things across the game's rather small planets, and you end up with an adventure that is frequently just going through the motions.

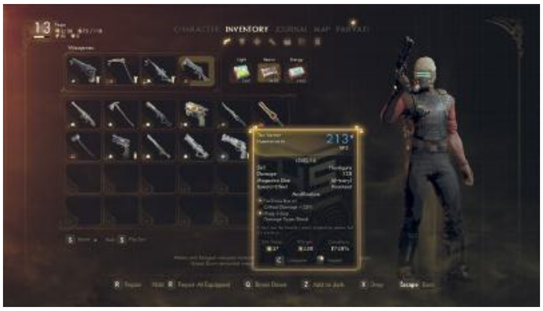
The setting is the game's most divisive element. It wants to be a mix of *Firefly*, *Rick and Morty* and *Futurama,* but it doesn't have anything to say. It presents a capitalist dystopia full of moral choices, but also keeps the "apolitical" tone of most western games, enforcing a blunt centrism that condemns any radical approach. It's a step back from the worlds of *Fallout* and *Arcanum,* reducing all the conflicts of society to a few individuals you either help or kill. It's funny, but never clever.

Despite these shortcomings, *Outer Worlds* is a competent game, released at a time when fans were starved for AAA RPGs. For those seeking a kind of comfort-food RPG, it surely delivers. What remains to be seen is if that will be enough to make it a classic in the vein of Obsidian's more ambitious games. **FE**

Obsidian made a documentary with NoClip about the development of *The Outer Worlds*.

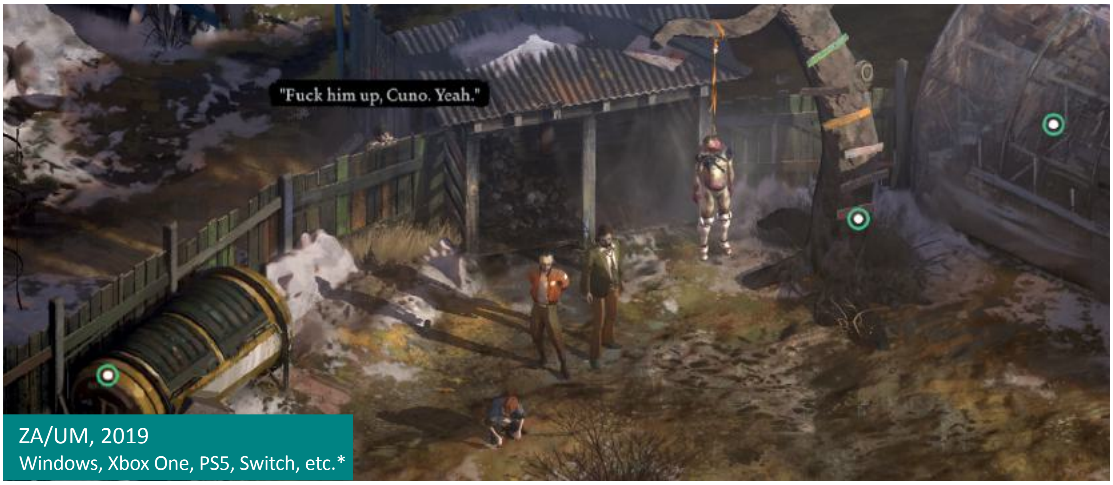


Outer Worlds offers six companions, with up to two accompanying the player; they are written very seriously, which often conflicts with the game's constant absurdity



The game offers many weapons with different stats and effects, but the level-scaling makes their DPS matter more than any of your character's stats or skills

Disco Elysium



ZA/UM, 2019
Windows, Xbox One, PS5, Switch, etc.*

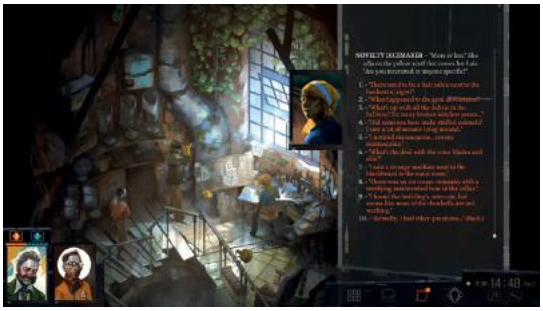
***The Final Cut* is an enhanced version of the game released in 2021. It adds full voice acting, new quests and an expanded soundtrack.**

After 40 years of computer role-playing adventures, players and developers alike firmly believed in an unspoken set of rules: games were supposed to feature challenging fights, verbose dialogues, sinister villains, treasure chests, a world in need of saving and no political statements of any kind. For a while, it worked pretty well.

And then the release of *Disco Elysium* in 2019 shattered all of these expectations.

Created by a team of Estonian artists, *Disco Elysium* plays like a traditional isometric CRPG, complete with companions, dialogues, mysteries to solve, containers to search and beautiful hand-painted landscapes. The big difference from other classic role-playing games is that the hero is a giant failure of a human being. He's a loony, alcoholic cop, who struggles to solve a simple murder case because of a massive hangover that left him grasping for his memory – and his clothing – in a dingy coastal hotel.

This odd starting point allows *Disco Elysium* to rely almost entirely on fascinating conversations, eccentric scenes, and embarrassing interactions: in just the first minutes, you may quarrel with a mirror, die when retrieving your tie from the ceiling fan, and clumsily attempt to seduce another hotel guest, all while trying to remember your own name and job.



Disco Elysium has a small area to explore, but it's filled with characters, objects and scenes that lead to long talks between them, you, your partner, and the voices in your head

There's an enormous amount of joy to be found here, while you frantically steer your character away from madness or take a dive into chaos, making good use of outlandish dialogue options.

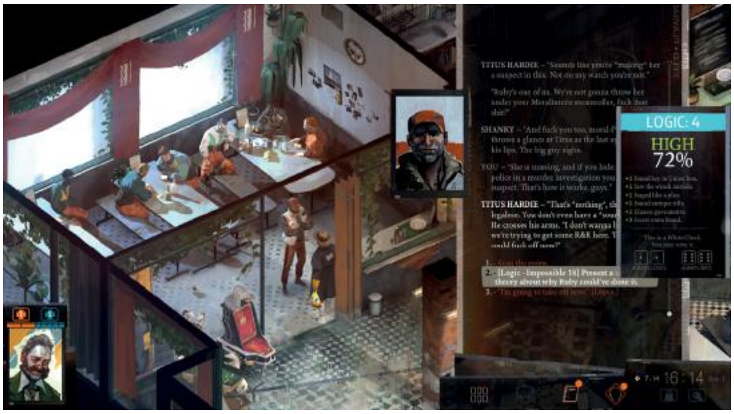
It's not just that *Disco Elysium* is well written. Sure, it's really pleasant to read, often hilarious, and the themes it explores (being a loser, investigating a police case) are refreshing after decades of the save-the-world routine in other RPGs. But the main draw of the dialogues is the skills, because in *Disco Elysium*, each and every one of your 24 skills can and will interrupt your conversations to voice its own opinion on the matter at hand or give dubious advice.

This new and original way to experience conversations in RPGs rewards every character build with unique interactions, like when the Encyclopedia skill interjects to explain historical facts, or when Endurance urges you to … convert to fascism. Clearly, it's not always a good idea to listen to these voices in your head, as it can lead to dramatic consequences.

However, failing a task or proving to be even more of a loser is never grounds for reloading the previous game save, as it would be in other CRPGs. Here, failure opens new doors instead of closing them, allowing the character to try new things and to experience situations so incredible (like when he puts his gun in his mouth and threatens to kill himself if a suspect doesn't talk) that they feel too important to just discard them by reloading the game.

Be careful though: characters in *Disco Elysium* remember what you have said to them, and it might be difficult to question them as a cop if you previously told them your name was "harbinger of doom" or if they have seen you fail horribly at karaoke. On the other hand, who knows? It might sometimes be easier if people pity you.

> “I want there to be fictional universes that talk about our own real life experiences. About the political problems we’re facing, the geopolitical structures around us, the problems of the modern world, etc. Universes which don’t leave us feeling numb, alone, and abandoned after we have finished exploring them. Which give us the strength to carry on with our lives, instead of making us feel empty to the point where we say, ‘Oh my god, I want to go back to the land of the Elves, but I can’t; I’ve already seen it all.’”
>
> *– Robert Kurvitz,*
> Disco Elysium*’s Lead designer/writer*



There are hundreds of skill checks in *Disco Elysium*; the chances of success can be improved under certain conditions, but the game pushes players to accept their failures and the unique outcomes they bring

The fictional world of *Disco Elysium*, a blend of the roaring twenties and the seventies with hints of soviet republics and Europe’s colonial empires, has a complex and gloomy history. Learning about it was one of the main highlights of my playthroughs, in part because the Estonian background of the developers allows for a political approach new to western CRPGs – a tone that is both melancholic and hopeful.

What *Disco Elysium* has to say is not just about politics. In a 2019 interview (quoted above), its lead writer explained that he wanted the game to be about our own real life experiences and the problems of modern society. It was supposed to give us a new way to engage in escapism, to give us tools to deal with our world.

It may sound ludicrous, but the game actually succeeds at energising us instead of sapping our strength. The masterful soundtrack helps, as it sparks positive emotions and a deep, blissful melancholy. But mostly, it’s due to the loser theme. Since *Disco Elysium*’s hero starts as a total failure, every little step in another direction feels like a victory.

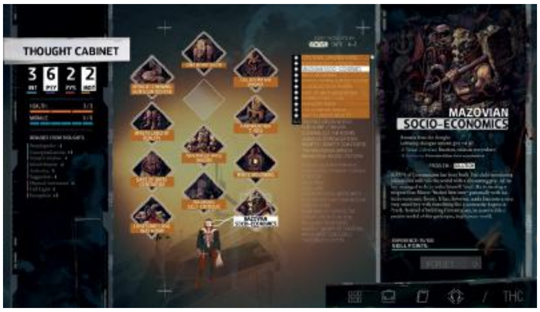
And if the embarrassment of the loser cop sometimes echoes our own, then it makes sense that his positive emotions also echo our own, like when we realize that we aren’t struggling alone: in life or in games, nobody has supported me better than lieutenant Kim Kitsuragi, a companion who looks like a cold, by-the-book cop at first and becomes much, much more.

Not everything in the game is done so brilliantly: some players resent the absence of traditional CRPG battles, replaced here by dialogue-based fights. Others have criticised the clothing system that encourages swapping clothes for a small bonus before a skill-check.

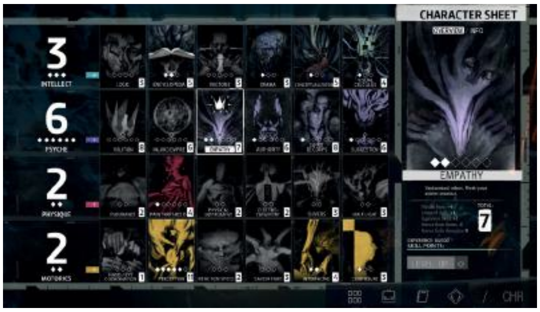
What bothered me the most was the thought cabinet, one of the game’s flagship ideas: an inventory where topics can be equipped to unlock new dialogue options. With the thought cabinet, the hero can become obsessed with having a superstar attitude or talking about a boxer named Contact Mike, bringing it up all the time. On paper, it’s great and showcases the game’s exceptional reactivity. However, I found the various effects these ideas have to be opaque at best, and confusing at worst.

Overall, these flaws don’t really matter: they are mere drops in a sea of excellence. Few games are as sharp in their world-building as *Disco Elysium*; fewer still are able to convey such emotions and depth. But perhaps the greatest success of the game lies in its texts: they are so unbelievably funny, original and enthralling that they give all CRPG developers something new to aim for. Sure, there’s still no combat in the game. But when every dialogue is a delightful struggle, who needs to shoot at monsters? **IZ**

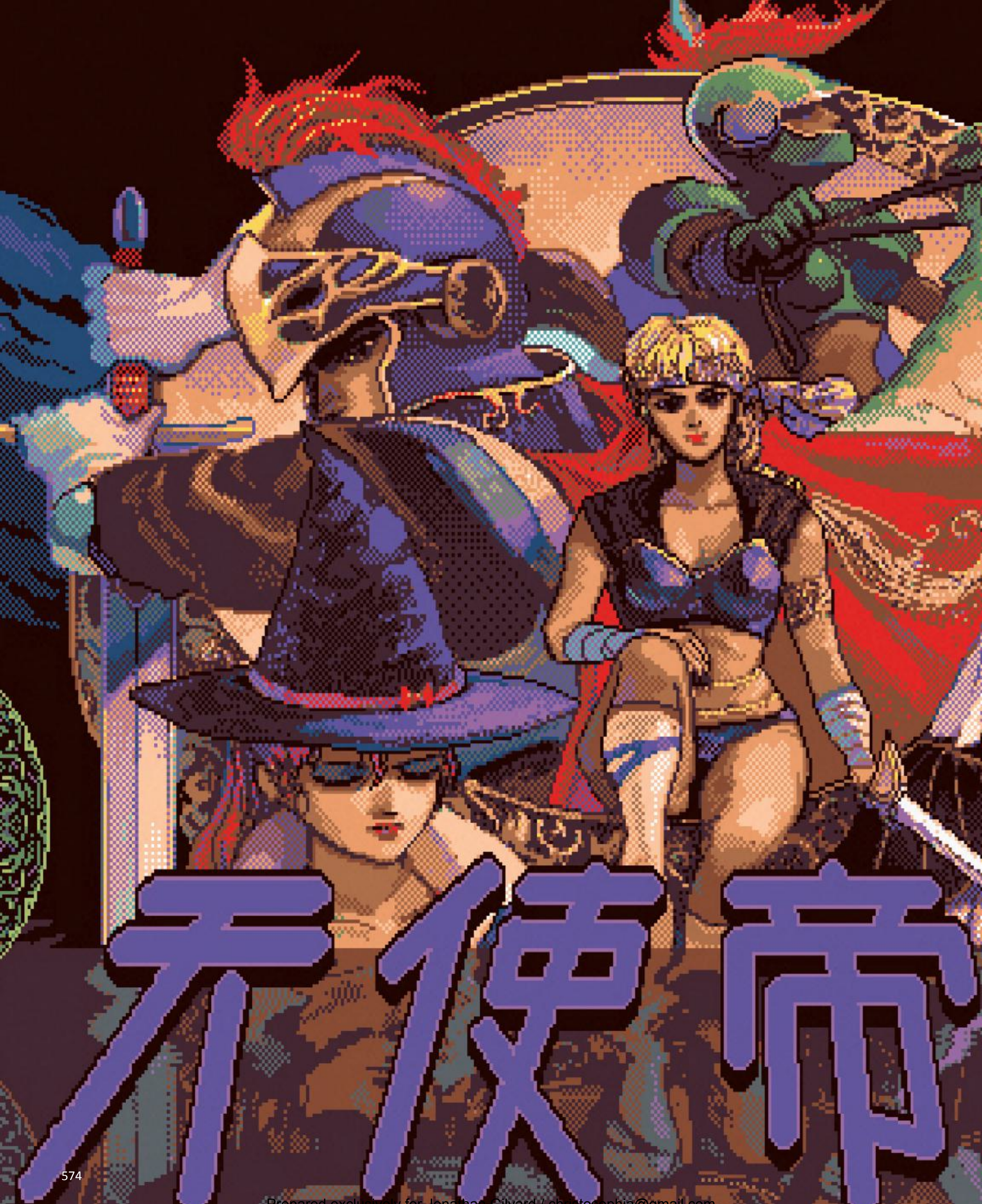
***Disco Elysium*'s setting was originally created by Robert Kurvitz for a tabletop RPG campaign. The setting was also used by him in a 2013 novel, called *Sacred and Terrible Air*.**

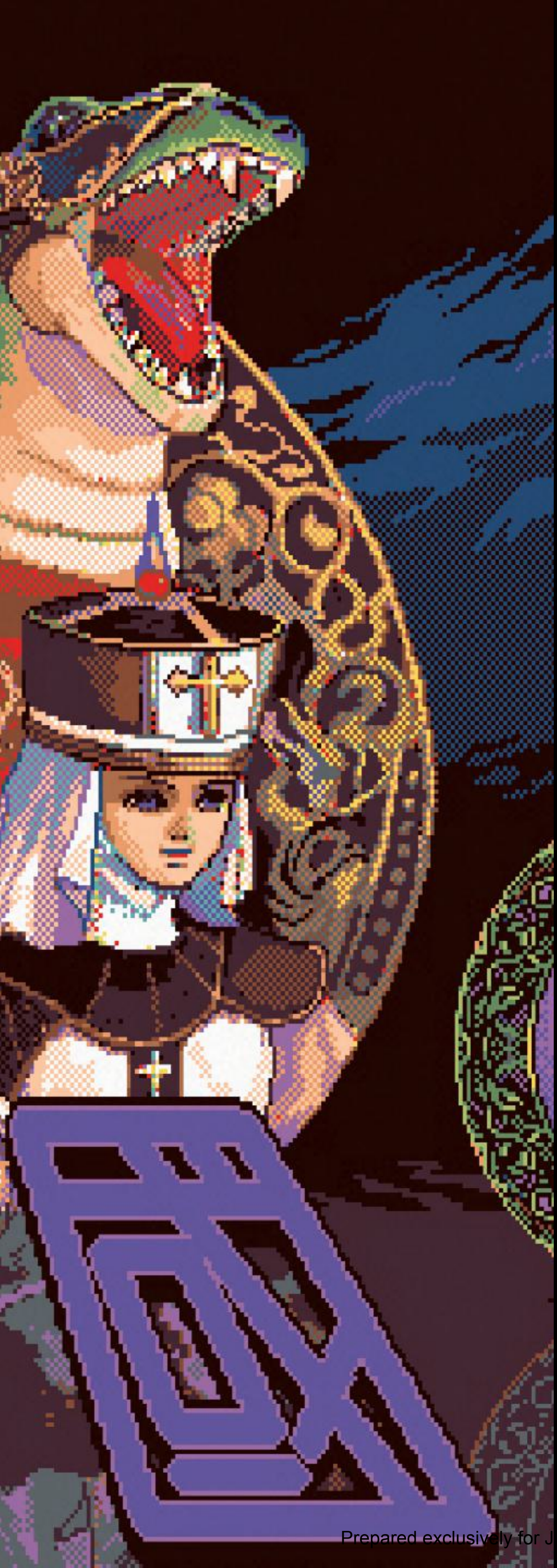


The thought cabinet lets you stick ideas in your mind, such as communist views, honour or nostalgia, colouring your world view



There are 24 skills, each with its own voice; a high skill is not always preferable: too strong an influence can misguide you


天使帝



Further Adventures

The first version of this book had many flaws; its biggest one was, unfortunately, common to most content about videogames – an unhealthy focus on games from North America, Europe and Japan, favouring the big titles of the "game canon" while overlooking important games outside of it.

While it's true that most people will never be able to play a game that was only released in Turkish or Korean, they are still part of the history of RPGs and often offer experiences unlike any other game.

For this Expanded Edition, this whole section was revisited, adding a brief overview of non-English games from France, South Korea and China; an article on *RPG Maker* and the highly influential titles made with the tool; plus an article on the evolution of MUDs, MMORPGs and online RPGs in general.

These articles are relatively short: their purpose is not to be in-depth examinations, but rather glimpses of how diverse videogame history really is.

Hopefully, these will entice others to explore these parallel worlds, and one day there will be entire books dedicated to the global *RPG Maker* scene, to the golden age of Flash games, or to the evolution of Korean MMORPGs.

The title screen for *Angel Empire* (天使帝國), a Taiwanese tactical RPG from 1993

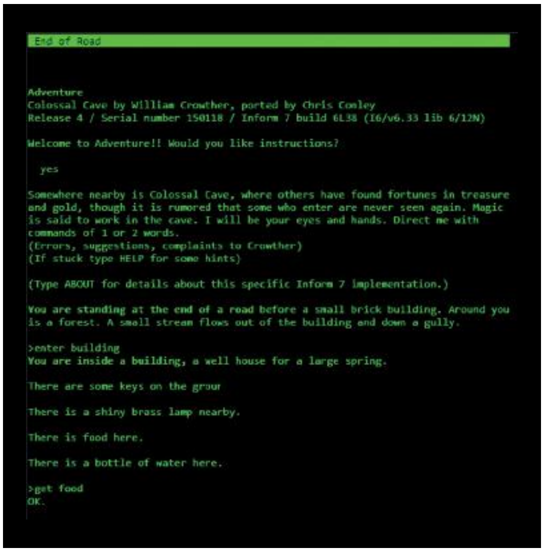
A brief history of MUDs, online RPGs and MMORPGs

This book began by examining the origin of tabletop RPGs in Prussian wargames, then their jump into the world of computers via the PLATO system, leading to over 40 years of Computer Role-Playing Games. But that's only part of the story.

While the focus of the CRPG Book is on single-player games, it's undeniable that they are closely tied to MMORPGs – Massively Multiplayer Online RPGs, such as *World of Warcraft* and *Ultima Online* – as well as other forms of online role-playing game.

Such a topic could easily fill its own book, so the next pages are only a brief overview of their history and evolution, highlighting key games and moments, in order to provide the reader with more context for the fascinating history of videogames.

And just like with CRPGs, it all began with a few students playing around with university computers.



```
End of Road



Adventure
Colossal Cave by William Crowther, ported by Chris Conley
Release 4 / Serial number 150118 / Inform 7 build 6L38 (I6/v6.33 lib 6/12N)

Welcome to Adventure!! Would you like instructions?

  yes

Somewhere nearby is Colossal Cave, where others have found fortunes in treasure
and gold, though it is rumored that some who enter are never seen again. Magic
is said to work in the cave. I will be your eyes and hands. Direct me with
commands of 1 or 2 words.
(Errors, suggestions, complaints to Crowther)
(If stuck type HELP for some hints)

(Type ABOUT for details about this specific Inform 7 implementation.)

You are standing at the end of a road before a small brick building. Around you
is a forest. A small stream flows out of the building and down a gully.

>enter building
You are inside a building, a well house for a large spring.

There are some keys on the grour

There is a shiny brass lamp nearby.

There is food here.

There is a bottle of water here.

>get food
OK.
```

Colossal Cave had multiple versions and releases, adding more puzzles and features like score tracking; this is a recreation of one of the earliest versions, available at www.ifiction.org

WHAT'S A MUD?

MUDs began in 1978, with Roy Trubshaw and Richard Bartle, two students at Essex University in the UK. They played *ADVENT* (also known as *Colossal Cave* or *Adventure*), a game from around 1976 in which you explore a cave (composed of multiple "rooms"), solving puzzles and collecting treasures to gain points. It's the legendary game that created the adventure game genre and inspired countless developers. The game was fully text-based, with all interactions via typing text commands like "OPEN DOOR" or "GET KEYS".

Inspired by *ADVENT*, the two students created their own version, but with a revolutionary twist: multiple players could explore this world. So, instead of being a normal dungeon, it was a **M**ulti-**U**ser **D**ungeon: a MUD. (Their game would later be referred to as *MUD1, British Legends* or *Essex MUD.*)

> *"A key innovation was that MUDs were open-ended in a way that* ADVENT *wasn't (and adventure games today still aren't). MUDs were about freedom;* ADVENT *was about puzzle-solving. Although MUD did feature some* ADVENT*-style puzzles, they were less constrained and more non-linear. This wasn't just for philosophical reasons, either: in practical terms, if one object (such as* ADVENT*'s lamp) was the key to advancing, then whoever got it first would lock up the game for everyone else."* – Richard Bartle, *MMOs from the Inside Out* (2016)

The whole game is very open and mysterious; figuring out what you should do is one of the challenges and a reason to talk to other players – be it for trading tips or to help with specific obstacles, such as lifting a heavy object.

While the text commands were primitive, they were enough to enable conversations with other players, and even offered emotes like smiling or hugging. Combat was similarly simple: you just type KILL "CREATURE" and your character will fight it automatically. But there are also spells and items to use in battle. Monsters can kill you permanently, forcing you to create a new character and start from zero.

A unique feature of *MUD1* is that gaining points makes your character level up. Reach the maximum level and you become a wizard – immortal and able to cast spells that affect you, other players or even the entire game server – effectively becoming the equivalent to a GM (Game Master) in a modern MMO. A wizard can freely teleport, see what other players are doing, freeze time for everyone except himself or even kill or imprison other players.

A landmark in videogame history, *MUD1* would define the genre. While the PLATO RPGs were all about combat and stats, here the exploration and social aspects were at the forefront. Combat was just a type of obstacle, or a drastic way to interact with other players.

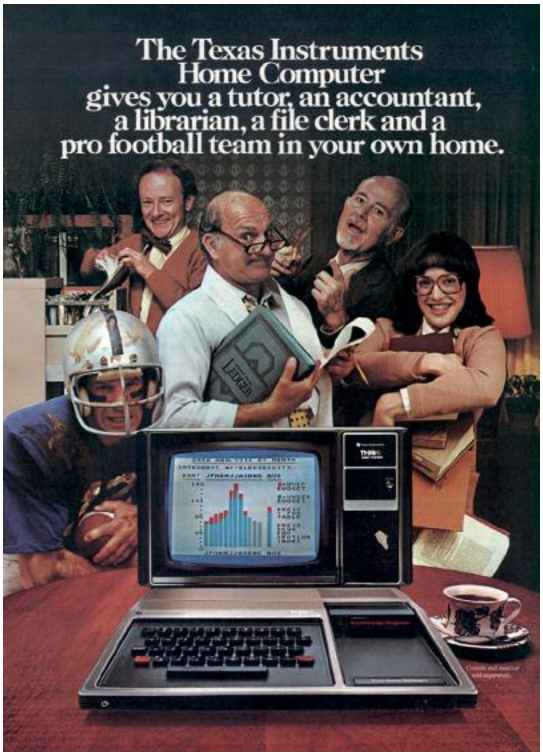
Like the PLATO games, it was originally only accessible to students at the university. However, in 1983 Essex University allowed people with home computers to connect to their network at night, spreading the game to a much wider audience.

THE JUMP TO PERSONAL COMPUTERS

Personal home computers began appearing in the mid '70s, with iconic machines like the Apple II, Commodore PET and TRS-80. Soon, there were several different brands: IBM, Apple, Commodore, Sinclair, Amstrad, Texas Instruments, etc. Each incompatible with the other. Imagine iPhone vs. Android phones, but with dozens of competing standards.

Also, they were mostly a very expensive novelty for tech enthusiasts. Slow and hard to use, most would just give you a black screen when powered on, requiring you to type relatively complex commands before they did anything. There wasn't a "killer app", a good reason for every house to have one. You could write text, make data sheets and play a few games, but was that enough?

In the '90s, the Internet would become this "killer app", but there was no Internet yet – only closed networks like the ARPANET, which connected universities and defence centres in the US. At home, all you could do was use your modem to dial up another computer via the phone – paying phone charges by the minute! Since dialling outside your area meant a more expensive fee, people were mostly connecting to local servers that hosted online forums called BBSs.


The Texas Instruments Home Computer gives you a tutor, an accountant, a librarian, a file clerk and a pro football team in your own home.

Expensive, difficult to use and with few practical purposes, early computers had a hard time reaching a wider audience. They tried to solve this by selling themselves as machines for the whole family, as in this ad for a TI-99/4A, from 1981

A BBS (Bulletin Board Service), as the name suggests, is like a local electronic message board. You login, post a message, and people will be able to reply to it. They could also host files, later becoming important tools for the distribution of demos and shareware titles such as 1991's *ZZT* and 1993's *Doom*.

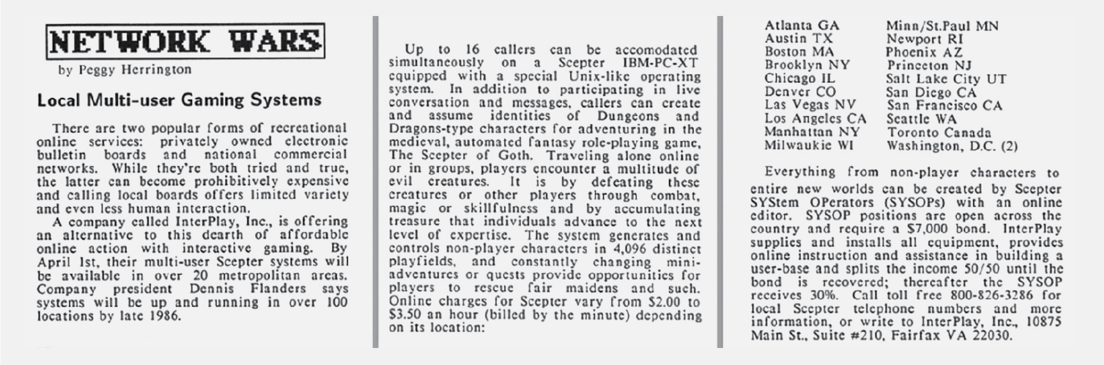
With BBSs growing popular among the wealthy few tech enthusiasts who owned computers, modems started to become a common accessory, with developers and companies trying to target this blooming market.

In 1978, Alan E. Klietz wrote *Milieu*, a *Colossal Cave* clone with a heavy *Dungeons & Dragons* influence. Like *MUD1*, it also had multiplayer support – it's not surprising that such a concept was "invented" multiple times by multiple people across the globe – but was initially restricted to an educational mainframe in Minnesota, severely limiting its early influence.

However, in 1983 Klietz converted it for home computers, allowing up to 16 players to play together, connected via modem to a central server. Renamed *Sceptre of Goth*, it became the first commercial MUD/online RPG, being sold as a franchising business in the US: companies could pay for the licence and equipment needed to run local servers, charging players per hour.

Sceptre of Goth originally only had one server. The idea for a franchising system came after one of its programmers took the game's code and made a pirate server with cheaper fees

Unlike *MUD1*, *Sceptre of Goth* played more like tabletop *D&D*, with players creating characters with stats and classes, then exploring a virtual world, with a paid server admin in the role of Dungeon Master.



A 1986 article from INFO Magazine #10, explaining how *Scepter of Goth*'s gameplay and franchising system worked

NETWORK WARS

by Peggy Herrington

Local Multi-user Gaming Systems

There are two popular forms of recreational online services: privately owned electronic bulletin boards and national commercial networks. While they're both tried and true, the latter can become prohibitively expensive and calling local boards offers limited variety and even less human interaction.

A company called InterPlay, Inc., is offering an alternative to this dearth of affordable online action with interactive gaming. By April 1st, their multi-user Scepter systems will be available in over 20 metropolitan areas. Company president Dennis Flanders says systems will be up and running in over 100 locations by late 1986.

Up to 16 callers can be accomodated simultaneously on a Scepter IBM-PC-XT equipped with a special Unix-like operating system. In addition to participating in live conversation and messages, callers can create and assume identities of Dungeons and Dragons-type characters for adventuring in the medieval, automated fantasy role-playing game, The Scepter of Goth. Traveling alone online or in groups, players encounter a multitude of evil creatures. It is by defeating these creatures or other players through combat, magic or skillfulness and by accumulating treasure that individuals advance to the next level of expertise. The system generates and controls non-player characters in 4,096 distinct playfields, and constantly changing mini-adventures or quests provide opportunities for players to rescue fair maidens and such. Online charges for Scepter vary from $2.00 to $3.50 an hour (billed by the minute) depending on its location:

Atlanta GA
Austin TX
Boston MA
Brooklyn NY
Chicago IL
Denver CO
Las Vegas NV
Los Angeles CA
Manhattan NY
Milwaukie WI
Minn/St.Paul MN
Newport RI
Phoenix AZ
Princeton NJ
Salt Lake City UT
San Diego CA
San Francisco CA
Seattle WA
Toronto Canada
Washington, D.C. (2)

Everything from non-player characters to entire new worlds can be created by Scepter SYStem OPerators (SYSOPs) with an online editor. SYSOP positions are open across the country and require a $7,000 bond. InterPlay supplies and installs all equipment, provides online instruction and assistance in building a user-base and splits the income 50/50 until the bond is recovered; thereafter the SYSOP receives 30%. Call toll free 800-826-3286 for local Scepter telephone numbers and more information, or write to InterPlay, Inc., 10875 Main St., Suite #210, Fairfax VA 22030.

THE RISE OF ONLINE SERVICE PROVIDERS

Of course, other companies were also interested in this new market. Around 1979, the first Online Service Providers began to appear in the US, such as CompuServe, The Source, GEnie and Prodigy. These are not to be confused with modern Internet Service Providers, as there was no Internet yet. Instead, they sold access to servers with services such as email, online newspapers, chat rooms and games.

Like modern console companies searching for exclusive games, so the online service providers tried to find an addicting game – a reason for people to contract their services. Some famous online games from this era include Kesmai's 1987 *Air Warrior*, a 3D flight simulator in which you could battle players online, and 1989's *MadMaze*, an adventure game.

Another of those games was 1985's *Island of Kesmai,* arguably one of the most advanced games of its time. It was still text-based, with just a tiny ASCII view similar to that in a Roguelike, but that simplicity allowed it to offer a depth that it would take years for graphical RPGs to rival. Up to 100 players at once could explore a large open world, killing monsters, doing elaborate quests and hunting "world bosses" that required a powerful party to take down.

IoK also had an alignment system, whereby PvP and theft were punished by making the killer "chaotic", marking them as a free target for PvP and having NPC guards attack them — a system still used today.

Active from 1985 to 1995, *Island of Kesmai* received multiple expansions, adding new areas and challenges. A key feature was travelling from the Basic Game to the Advanced Game. Doing so would allow you to progress further, but it was a one-way journey to much more dangerous lands. And death in *IoK* could be permanent.

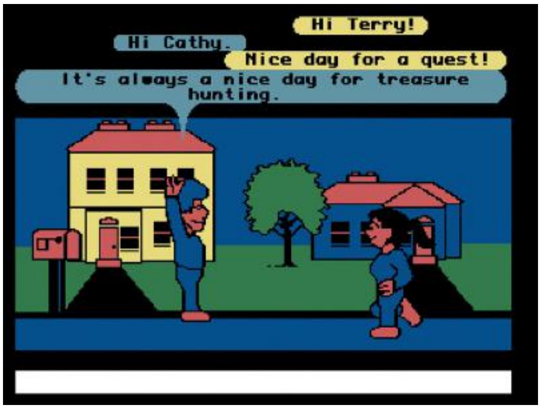
Thanks to a devout fan-base, *Kesmai* is one of the best-documented early online games, with multiple guides explaining its systems and the strategies to beat each boss. You can even watch replays from old players using *Hunter*, a fan-made graphical front-end.

HABITAT AND GRAPHICAL MUDS

Another online game made for Online Service Providers, *Habitat* (1986) was created by LucasArts, a large studio, bringing in animated graphics, a friendlier interface and a more mainstream-oriented approach.

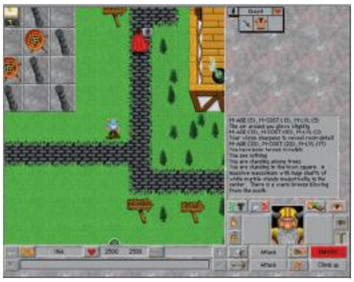
Often called the first graphical MUD, *Habitat* follows a familiar formula: a world composed of rooms that multiple users can explore, interact with and socialize in by typing text commands. However, *Habitat* had no goals. No dragon to kill, not even a score system to track all your treasure. It was just a big world to explore with other people. Sometimes it had activities set by the developers, such as treasure hunts, but mostly it was a sandbox. Some would use it to hang out with friends and meet new people, while others would do things like start a business or run a newspaper inside the game.

There are many amazing stories surrounding the game and its social experiments, like the fact that *Habitat* had guns and the developers let the community decide how to deal with people who killed others to steal their items. All this would signal the start of a new path for MUDs and other virtual worlds in general – the focus on social elements above all else.



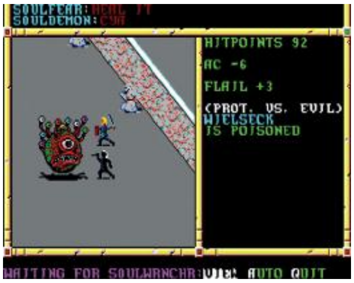
Habitat would popularise the idea of in-game avatars, and already offered new clothes and heads for sale with in-game currency

Kingdom of Drakkar (1989)



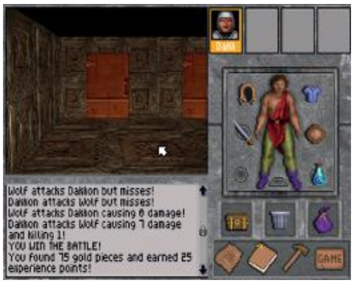
Originally a 1984 text-only MUD created by Brad Lineberger called *Realms*, it was expanded and re-released with a graphical front-end in 1989, supporting up to 200 players. The game was upgraded again in 1991, becoming *Drakkar II*, the flagship of MPG-Net, an online service provider focused on games.

Neverwinter Nights (1991)



Based on SSI's extremely popular "Gold Box" series of single-player RPGs, *Neverwinter Nights* was hosted by AOL (America On-Line) with support for up to 200 players at once (later 500). It was the biggest of the MMOs in the early '90s, surviving until 1997 when an IP dispute closed it down.

The Shadow of Yserbius (1992)



```
Wolf attacks Dakkon but misses!
Dakkon attacks Wolf but misses!
Wolf attacks Dakkon causing 0 damage!
Dakkon attacks Wolf causing 7 damage
and killing 1!
YOU WIN THE BATTLE!
You found 75 gold pieces and earned 25
experience points!
```

A first-person online dungeon crawler, players would visit its tavern to chat to and recruit up to three other players to explore a massive dungeon, fighting together in turn-based combat and trying to solve puzzles. It later got two sequels, *The Fates of Twinion* (1993) and *The Ruins of Cawdor* (1995).

THE SECOND WAVE OF ONLINE RPGs

With home computer technology advancing and more Online Service Providers appearing, new online RPGs followed, with a famous trio of graphical MUDs/online RPGs around 1989–1992: *Kingdom of Drakkar*, *Neverwinter Nights* and *The Shadow of Yserbius*.

All these games would run for several years and form die-hard fan-bases that spent a small fortune playing. Not only were personal computers still very expensive, but access to these games was still paid at hourly rates. For reference, in 1991 CompuServe charged $5 for each hour using their services, while AOL charged $2.95/hour. Some games would charge an additional $3/hour – adjusting for 2021's values, playing online in 1991 could cost up to $12/hour – plus the phone bill!

As industry analyst Jessica Mulligan explains:

> *"On GEnie during 1991, our average MMOG [Massively Multiplayer Online Game] customer spent $156 per month, the equivalent of 32 hours at $3 per hour to play. However, the hardcore players averaged three times that and accounted for nearly 70% of the total revenue. The top 0.5% had truly astronomical bills, well over $1,000 per month."*

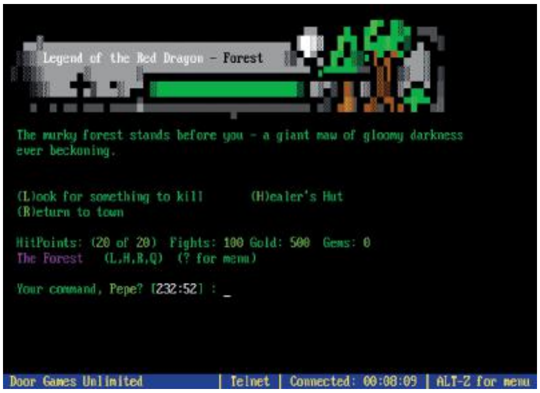
As happens with early-adopter products, online gaming was still a tiny market (most games supported only around 200 players) sustained by a few hardcore players with a lot of disposable income – or "whales", as modern marketing calls them.

BBS DOOR GAMES

BBSs were still the main social hubs for computer geeks to gather in, so it's not surprising that by the late '80s they would start hosting their own games as well. Known as BBS 'door games', these were text-based and meant for long-term asynchronous play, using limited daily actions to compete against other players.

The most famous was *Legend of the Red Dragon* (1989), an RPG in which you create a hero and fight enemies until you're strong enough to kill the red dragon. Once a player kills the dragon, a new game round starts. It was famous for its humour and adult content, featuring many sexual encounters, and for having several fan-made expansions, called IGMs ("In Game Modules").

Other BBS classics were *Trade Wars 2002* (1991) a complex space trading game that would later inspire *EVE Online*; *The Pit* (1990), a gladiator arena RPG; and *DopeWars* (1990), a drug-dealing management game.



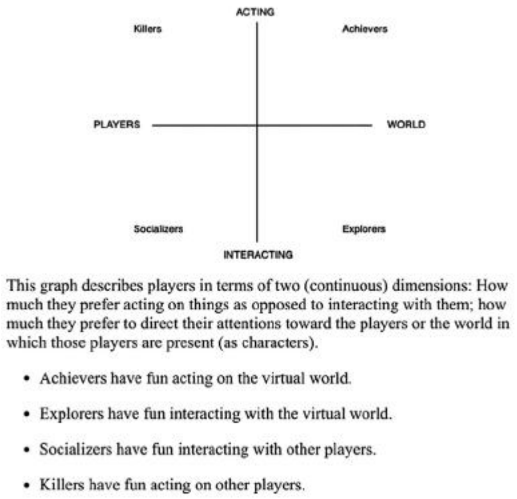
```
The murky forest stands before you - a giant maw of gloomy darkness
ever beckoning.

(L)ook for something to kill       (H)ealer's Hut
(R)eturn to town

HitPoints: (20 of 20)  Fights: 100 Gold: 500  Gems: 0
The Forest   (L,H,R,Q)  (? for menu)

Your command, Pepe? [232:52] : _

Door Games Unlimited          | Telnet | Connected: 00:08:09 | ALT-Z for menu
```

Legend of the Red Dragon was created by Seth Robinson to push people to visit his BBS; he claims that between 15,000 and 20,000 BBSs hosted licensed copies of the game, but countless more pirated it

THE GREAT MUD DIVIDE

So far, all these online RPGs focused on gameplay, with only *Habitat* focusing primarily on social elements. You could talk to other players while killing monsters and solving puzzles, but that was more of a side activity; the core of the game was embarking on an adventure.

However, players are a diverse bunch and want different things in a game/virtual world. Richard Bartle, the same that co-created *MUD*, has a very famous theory on this, splitting players into four groups – Achievers, Explorers, Socialisers and Killers:



This graph describes players in terms of two (continuous) dimensions: How much they prefer acting on things as opposed to interacting with them; how much they prefer to direct their attentions toward the players or the world in which those players are present (as characters).

- Achievers have fun acting on the virtual world.
- Explorers have fun interacting with the virtual world.
- Socializers have fun interacting with other players.
- Killers have fun acting on other players.

The famous Bartle taxonomy of player types, from *Designing Virtual Worlds* by Richard Bartle (2003), which has since been released under Creative Commons

Online games were still few and far between, with tiny communities, so players who wanted to focus more on socialising didn't have much choice. This changed when, in 1989, a group of students in the UK developed *AberMUD*, heavily inspired by the original *MUD1* – and then released the source code for free.

This is a landmark in online history. Suddenly, thousands of MUDs began appearing across the world, with people modifying the code to change the setting, add new features, etc. These would lead to two very distinct evolutionary paths: *TinyMUD* and *DikuMUD*.

DikuMUD was for people who wanted to kill monsters – or other players. Created in 1990–1991 by five Danish students at the University of Copenhagen, the base game offered four classes – mage, warrior, thief and cleric – each with set combat roles (the omnipresent Tank/DPS/Healer trifecta). Killing monsters would earn you loot and XP, and you would return to town to level up and earn new abilities. These abilities would have cool-downs, and allow characters to draw aggro, crowd-control or even summon pets.

Yes, this describes most post-*EverQuest*/*World of Warcraft* MMOs. That's how influential *DikuMUD* is.

TinyMUD, on the other hand, was created to be a more social MUD, with a smaller world to explore but more possibilities for social interactions, like the ability to privately talk to another character (before, anyone else in the same room could hear you).

But its key feature was revolutionary: players could edit the game world, making their own rooms and objects for others to use. A virtual place that anyone can customise, then show to friends and visit theirs as well – this is one of the pillars of the Internet 2.0, of *GeoCities*, of social media, of *Habbo Hotel*, *Second Life*, etc.

Initially, all you could do was to create a room, write a description for it, then place items inside and write descriptions for them. For example:

```
@dig <BATCAVE>
@create <BATMOBILE>
@describe <BATMOBILE> [=<You see Batman's car, ready to leap into action.>]
@create <BATMAN>
@describe <BATMAN> [=<"I am vengeance!", he says in a rough voice.>]
```

Typing this, you could create a batcave that other players could come to see, reading Batman's dialogue then checking his car and whatever else you create.

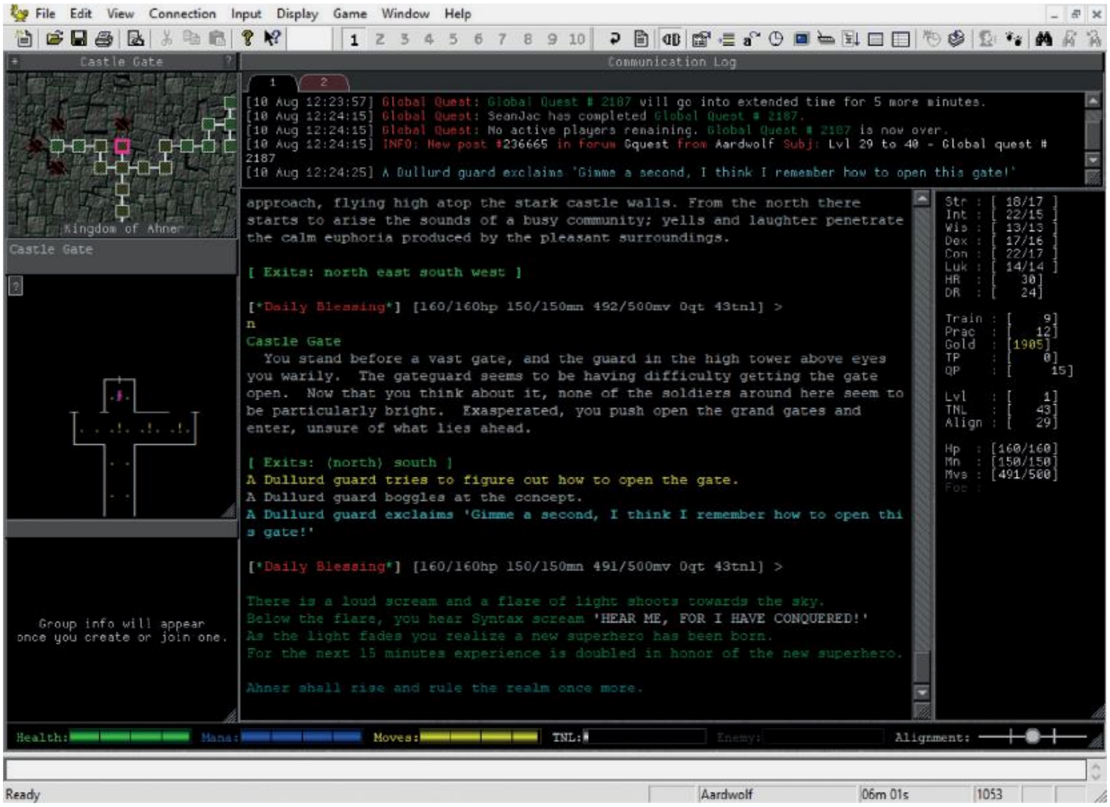
With all this, the stage was set for thousands of MUDs to appear across the world, sporting all kinds of features: there were DikuMUDs, TinyMUDs, MUCKs, LPMUDs, AberMUDs, MUSHes, MOOS, etc.

Beyond the technical terms, what matters is that there were MUDs of all types and settings. Some were based on *Star Wars*, *Lords of the Rings*, *Dune* or anime series, others had original settings. Some were still epic adventures, others were built as educational tools, or purely for role-playing – including erotic MUDs.

Some MUDs were paid, but the majority were free, hosted by students using expensive university infrastructure; their online addresses shared on BBSs and in newspapers and magazines. It was a craze, with even Aerosmith joining in, doing a "Cyberspace Tour" in 1994 in which they chatted with fans inside a MUD.

Like *Habitat* before them, MUDs also began to face complex social issues. Virtual referenda were created to decide in-game laws and how to handle events such as *LambdaMOO*'s famous "cyberrape" case.

Thanks to young programmers studying abroad, MUDs soon began appearing not only across North America and Europe, but also in Latin America and Asia, with pioneers such as *ShacraMUD* (1993) in Chile, *Jurassic Park* (쥬라기 공원, 1994) in South Korea and *Eastern Fantasy 2 (*東方故事2, 1994*)* in Taiwan.



```
[10 Aug 12:23:57] Global Quest: Global Quest # 2187 will go into extended time for 5 more minutes.
[10 Aug 12:24:15] Global Quest: SeanJac has completed Global Quest # 2187.
[10 Aug 12:24:15] Global Quest: No active players remaining. Global Quest # 2187 is now over.
[10 Aug 12:24:15] INFO: New post #236665 in forum Gquest from Aardwolf Subj: Lvl 29 to 40 - Global quest #
2187
[10 Aug 12:24:25] A Dullurd guard exclaims 'Gimme a second, I think I remember how to open this gate!'
```

```
approach, flying high atop the stark castle walls. From the north there
starts to arise the sounds of a busy community; yells and laughter penetrate
the calm euphoria produced by the pleasant surroundings.

[ Exits: north east south west ]

[*Daily Blessing*] [160/160hp 150/150mn 492/500mv 0qt 43tnl] >
n
Castle Gate
  You stand before a vast gate, and the guard in the high tower above eyes
you warily.  The gateguard seems to be having difficulty getting the gate
open.  Now that you think about it, none of the soldiers around here seem to
be particularly bright.  Exasperated, you push open the grand gates and
enter, unsure of what lies ahead.

[ Exits: (north) south ]
A Dullurd guard tries to figure out how to open the gate.
A Dullurd guard boggles at the concept.
A Dullurd guard exclaims 'Gimme a second, I think I remember how to open thi
s gate!'

[*Daily Blessing*] [160/160hp 150/150mn 491/500mv 0qt 43tnl] >

There is a loud scream and a flare of light shoots towards the sky.
Below the flare, you hear Syntax scream 'HEAR ME, FOR I HAVE CONQUERED!'
As the light fades you realize a new superhero has been born.
For the next 15 minutes experience is doubled in honor of the new superhero.

Ahner shall rise and rule the realm once more.
```

```
Str : [ 18/17 ]
Int : [ 22/15 ]
Wis : [ 13/13 ]
Dex : [ 17/16 ]
Con : [ 22/17 ]
Luk : [ 14/14 ]
HR  : [    30]
DR  : [    24]

Train  : [     9]
Prac   : [    12]
Gold   : [1905]
TP     : [     0]
QP     : [      15]

Lvl    : [     1]
TNL    : [    43]
Align  : [    29]

Hp  : [160/160]
Mn  : [150/150]
Mvs : [491/500]
Foe :
```

MUDs are still played today; the image shows *Aardwolf* (1996), which still averages around 100 online players, being played on MUSHClient, a modern tool for playing MUDs

In Asia, MUDs would become absolutely massive, serving as the first step for the region's online industry:

> *"By 1996 there were over 100 MUDs available to Korean players, with an estimated 200,000 people playing them regularly. Jurassic Park was the most successful, quickly generating over 20,000 visits per day and earning $20,000 in the month of July, 1994. Its growth would eventually reach over $200,000 per month in revenue for Samjung Data Systems."*
> — Jong H Wi (Innovation and Strategy of Online Games, 2009)

With so many options, the two evolutionary branches would slowly drift further and further apart. Social MUDs and *Habitat* clones would converge into chat rooms with avatars, such as *Worlds Chat* (1995), *The Palace* (1995) and *Microsoft V-Chat* (1995), or into virtual worlds focused on social interaction, role-playing and user expression, such as *Worlds.com* (1995), *Habbo Hotel* (2000), *Gaia Online* (2003), *Second Life* (2003), *Club Penguin* (2005), *VR Chat* (2014), etc.

The *DikuMUD* descendants, on the other hand, would merge with the upcoming wave of MMORPGs, taking the systems and gameplay loops that had been perfected in MUDs and adding fancy new graphics.

THE INTERNET ARRIVES

Around 1991, what we today call the Internet would finally start to form. Up to this point, all that was available were closed networks like ARPANET and people at their homes using modems to directly call other PCs, BBSs or an Online Service Provider. There were no web pages or sites – things like checking the news or sending emails had to all be done through the local servers of an Online Service Provider.

The Internet means you use your modem to call an Internet Service Provider (ISP) such as AOL, and that service connects you to this big web of servers – the World Wide Web. With this, anyone with Internet access could now reach online content from anywhere in the world – and without paying any extra fees.

Of course, the Internet in 1991 was very different from today's. It only had a few dozen websites, hosted by universities and researchers, and the first browsers couldn't even display images. The few online browser games at the time were things like crosswords, quizzes, *Tic-Tac-Toe* and online interactive fiction (short stories with multiple paths, navigated via hyperlinks).

It would take a few more years, but soon online servers would become more accessible and technologies like HTML, PHP, JavaScript and MySQL would appear, allowing for far more complex browser games.

MASSIVELY MULTIPLAYER ONLINE RPGS

There's no commonly agreed number for what makes an online RPG "massive", so it's meaningless to argue over the first MMORPG. This buzzword appeared in the second half of the '90s to signal one thing: servers now supported more people playing together.

By the mid-'90s, a new wave of online RPGs/MMOs had arrived: *The Realm Online*, *Meridian 59*, *Furcadia, Legends of Kesmai, Dark Sun Online* and Korea's *Nexus: Kingdom of the Winds* – all released in 1996.

While each has its merits, the game that would really push things forward was 1997's *Ultima Online*. *Ultima* was one of the biggest RPG series of the '80s and '90s, always bold and experimental: *Ultima IV–VI* dealt with morality in videogames, while *Ultima VII* tried a simulationist approach to RPG worlds, one in which you could get flour, add water, roll the dough with a rolling pin then bake it to make bread. It tried to be a living world, not just a fantasy land where you kill orcs.

Ultima Online embraced that, creating a simulated sandbox world where people could have traditional RPG adventures, PvP battles, item crafting and/or role-play. With thousands of players. At this scale, something that cannot happen with only a few dozen players can arise: a virtual society, with enough people to birth a dynamic economy – professions, worker guilds, markets, etc.

There were no levels or classes in *Ultima Online*, no chain of quests that every player must follow or end-game dungeons for veteran players to raid. There were adventures to be had, but one could enjoy just learning professions, trading, building houses and role-playing.

Ultima Online had a unique vision and the weight of the *Ultima* series behind it, becoming a huge hit and the first online RPG to have over 100,000 subscribers. But its success was also possible thanks to a big shift in how the Internet was used: flat monthly fees.

Until this point, everyone in the US who went online was paying an hourly fee – the more you use it, the more you pay. That changed in December 1996, when AOL, one of the US' biggest Internet providers, began charging a flat $19.95 monthly fee. This created a boom in Internet use, brought many new users and forced other providers to follow. Moreover, the games themselves felt the need to follow, with *Meridian 59* and *Ultima Online* offering monthly subscriptions.

This was a radical business change. Suddenly, it was not just a cool feature for online RPGs to support thousands of players at once – it was a necessity. They needed the scale gains because now the hardcore players were paying the same as the casual ones.

Ultima Online was definitely popular, but it would soon be dwarfed by South Korea's new MMORPG.

THE ASIAN ONLINE BOOM

Released in 1998 by NCsoft, *Lineage* was an MMORPG based around PvP (Player versus Player) battles, with different player factions fighting for control of the cities. From 1998 to 2004, *Lineage* was bigger than all the western MMOs combined.

Ultima Online peaked at around 240,000 monthly subscribers. *EverQuest* would reach 460,000 monthly subscribers. *Lineage* peaked at 3,250,000 monthly users.

There is a reason why *Lineage* lists users instead of subscribers: the game also revolutionised the Korean MMORPG industry. Korea's Internet Cafés (a.k.a. "PC bangs") were booming when *Lineage* came out in 1998 – the year of *StarCraft* – so they decided upon a novel business option: PC bangs would pay licence fees so that their clients could play *Lineage* without extra costs.

> *"In 2000 Internet café sales accounted for over 70% of NCsoft's annual revenue, more than 3 times the revenue that came from individual users on home computers."* — Jong H Wi (Innovation and Strategy of Online Games, 2009)

Lineage's massive success would push the Korean game industry to shift heavily into MMOs and dominate the early 2000s with global hits like *The Legend of Mir II* (2001), *Ragnarök Online* (2002), *MU Online* (2003), *MapleStory* (2003) and *Lineage II* (2003).

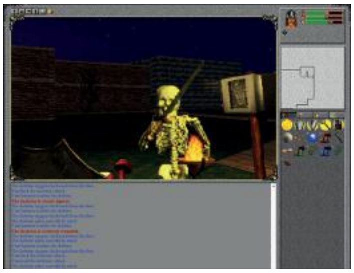
Meanwhile in China, MUDs were spreading and a few local MMOs like 1999's *King of Kings* (萬王之王) started to take off – but were then challenged by a wave of Korean MMOs and even some from Japan, like *Stone Age Online* (ストーンエイジ, 1999) and *CrossGate* (クロスゲート, 2001).

Incentivised by the government to fight back, local developers started making dozens of MMOs in the early 2000s. Among these, *Fantasy Westward Journey* (梦幻西游，2001) would be a hit and turn into one of the most profitable games ever, with $6.5 billion in lifetime revenue and over 400 million registered users.

While the *Diablo*-like combat of Korean MMOs like *MU Online* and *Legend of Mir II* was popular, *Westward Journey* would follow the JRPG-like formula seen in Japanese MMOs like *Stone Age Online*, with turn-based battles – a rare thing in Western MMOs.

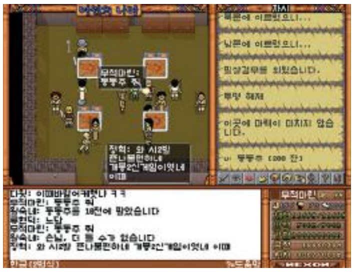
Another particularity of the Chinese market is their novel business model. They replaced monthly subscriptions with pre-paid game time cards, and were also pioneers in experimenting with free-to-play titles funded by micro-transactions. *ZT Online* (征途, 2006) would become infamous as one of the most exploitative games ever, responsible for introducing loot boxes.

Meridian 59 (1996)



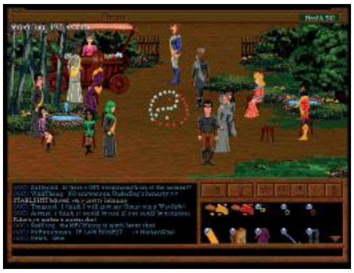
Presented its fantasy world in an impressive *Doom*-like first-person view, supporting a few hundred players at once. It also pioneered the use of monthly subscriptions.

Nexus: Kingdom of the Winds (1996)



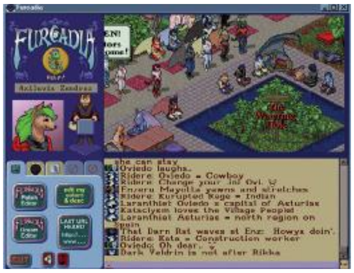
Based on a popular manhwa series and designed by Jake Song (송재경), the man behind the *Jurassic Park* MUD, it was the first big Korean MMORPG.

The Realm Online (1996)



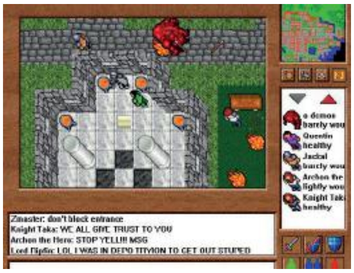
A mix of *Habitat* and MUDs, with cartoon avatars and a point-and-click interface, plus more emphasis on the RPG side, with turn-based combat and instanced dungeons.

Furcadia (1996)



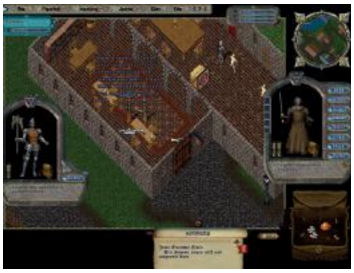
A furry free-to-play graphical MUD focused entirely on social interactions and exploring worlds created by its users; it was a blueprint for later virtual worlds such as *Habbo Hotel* (2000).

Tibia (1997)



A German MMORPG created by university students, its free-to-play model and simple graphics made it extremely accessible. Very popular across the global south in the 2000s, it led to several open-source clones.

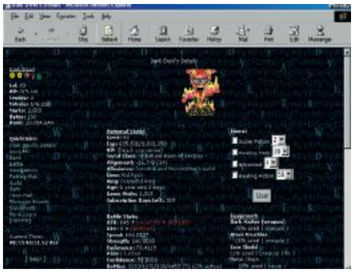
Ultima Online (1997)



A legendary game combining the simulationist approach of *Ultima* with a large dynamic online world that could host thousands of players simultaneously, creating an ambitious virtual society.

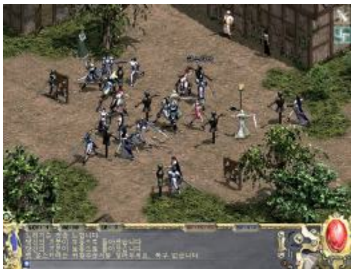
There are many fascinating stories surrounding *Ultima Online*, such as how its ecology was entirely simulated and got destroyed by players casually killing everything

Alien Adoption Agency (1997)



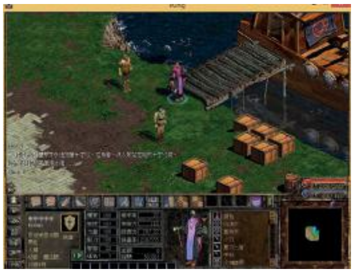
A browser-based RPG in which you adopt an alien, train it for battle and explore a virtual city full of mini-games, chatting with other players. One of the first virtual pet websites, it paved the way for *Neopets*.

Lineage (1998)



Also led by Jake Song, *Lineage* is a hardcore MMORPG focused on huge PvP battles. A massive hit, it reshaped the Korean game industry and stood as the world's most popular MMO until 2004.

King of Kings (萬王之王, 1999)



Based around founding a nation, building towns, managing them and fighting other nations, begun in 1996 as a MUD at the National Tsing Hua University of Taiwan, then, in 1999, turned into a graphical MMO.

THE RISE OF BROWSER-BASED GAMES

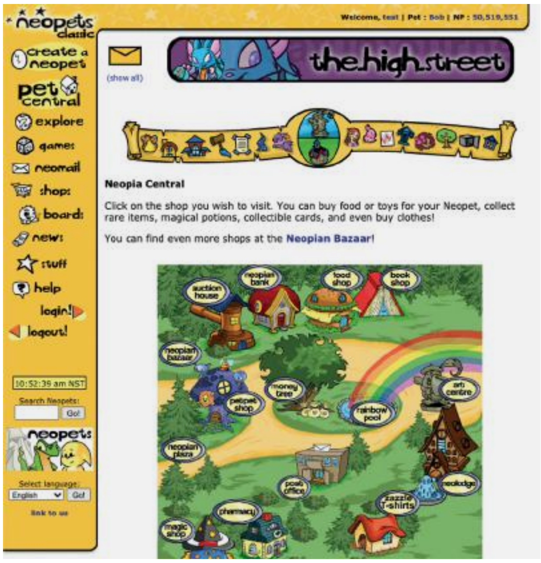
As the Internet matured, server accessibility grew and browsers began to support more complex features. In 1994, *ChibaMOO - The Sprawl*, a *Neuromancer*-inspired MUD, became playable within browsers. As it was a MOO, players could create houses inside this virtual world, open to anyone with Internet access.

Other browser-based MUDs would follow, but a bigger influence would come from BBS games in the form of *Earth: 2025* (1996), a multiplayer strategy game about creating and managing a nation, competing with hundreds of players. It was created by Mehul Patel, who also made the popular BBS game *Barren Realms Elite*.

This BBS-like style of multiplayer, menu-driven game was a perfect match for Internet browsers, which now offered mouse control and better UIs, and connect players all over the world, not just at the local BBS.

In 1997, *Alien Adoption Agency* would combine this style of browser-based game with another big trend of the late '90s: digital pets like the *Tamagotchi* (1996). It had players adopt a cartoon alien and raise it in a virtual city full of activities and mini-games. The core of the game was fighting other players' aliens in very basic turn-based battles that played out automatically, but you could also buy your alien a house, raise its stats at the gym, study at a university, play hangman, buy clothes, explore a mine, craft items, collect cards, etc.

In a time before social media, games like this became an online meeting point. You could chat with strangers, battle them and even marry off your aliens. The increased accessibility provided by browsers – with images, hyperlinks and a mouse interface – was perfect to attract the younger audiences that were now connecting for the first time to the Internet.



Neopia Central

Click on the shop you wish to visit. You can buy food or toys for your Neopet, collect rare items, magical potions, collectible cards, and even buy clothes!

You can find even more shops at the **Neopian Bazaar**!

Neopets would become one of the most popular browser games of all time, with over 60 million accounts, and, as of 2007, reaching 11 million monthly users

The game that truly understood this was *Neopets* (1999). It would conquer the Internet, replacing aliens and dull menus with colourful pets and illustrated maps, full of activities and mini-games. One of the biggest games of the 2000s, it peaked in 2005 at 11 million monthly players, spawning countless similar pet-raising browser games.

EVERQUEST AND MODERN MMORPGS

Browser games were conquering young players, *Ultima Online* was experimenting with online societies and Asian MMOs were focusing on PvP wars. Meanwhile, *EverQuest* (1999) was made by hardcore *DikuMUD* fans.

Like *DikuMUD* before it, *EQ* still had some social aspects, but they were all in support of combat and player progression. It was a world created to be conquered, focused on PvE (player versus environment) content. Players would form parties with set roles – Tank, Healer, DPS – killing monsters and raiding dungeons in order to level up, earn better loot and fight tougher enemies.

Just as *DikuMUD* would champion a wave of MUDs focused on combat above everything else, *EverQuest* would do the same for its genre, laying down the formula that most western MMOs would follow.

Part of these new standards meant abandoning the whole "virtual society" thing. It was no longer possible to live in town as a blacksmith, perfecting your craft to forge and sell the strongest blades to other players – now every player had to go out of town and kill monsters to progress, and the strongest weapons would be a reward for killing the strongest monsters.

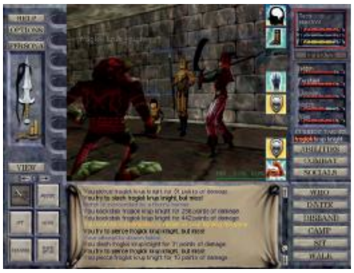
Most MMORPGs would abandon this concept of a player-driven virtual society, but not all.

Star Wars: Galaxies (2003) had 34 professions for players to pursue, most with no combat role whatsoever. Instead, they were a vital part of how the world worked. For example, to change your character's hairstyle you had to hire a player with the Image Designer profession. The higher their skill, the more options they could offer. And they (or their guild) would set their own fee.

In such a virtual society, there could be players who were max-level, extremely active, rich and important without ever having to kill a single creature.

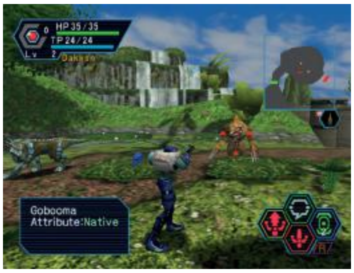
EVE Online (2003) went even further. Need a weapon? It must be crafted, with materials gathered from a miner, that need to be transported across space, where pirates await so guards must be hired. All these are people (or bots controlled by people), members of massive organizations fighting over resources, prices, regions and trade routes. It's a dense but incredible social experiment, studied by economists for being a complex "free market" that is perfectly observable.

EverQuest (1999)



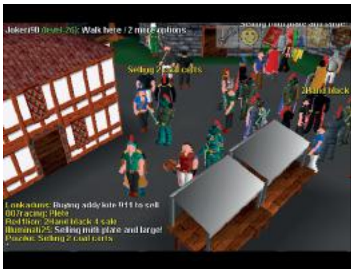
A 3D MMORPG heavily inspired by *DikuMUD*, it would become the biggest pre-*WoW* MMO in the west. It helped establish features such as raids and the DPS/Tank/Healer roles.

Phantasy Star Online (2000)



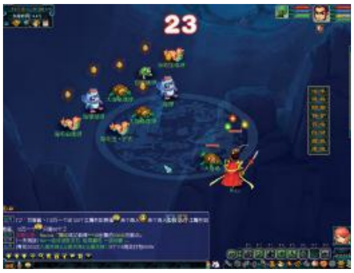
Inspired by *Diablo*, this Japanese action RPG for consoles lets you play offline or take your character online, meeting other players in a town hub to explore instanced areas.

Runescape (2001)



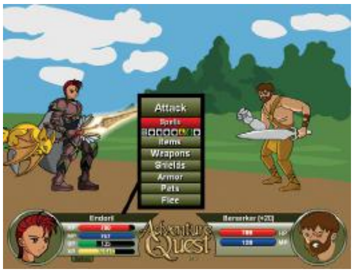
A free MMO played directly in a browser, it began as a simple graphic MUD and was then greatly improved over time. Extremely accessible, and has over 200 million player accounts.

Fantasy Westward Journey (2001)



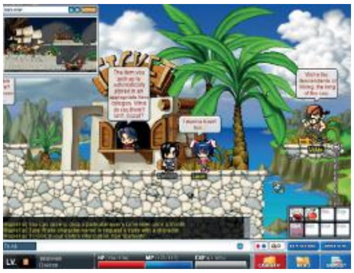
Unknown outside China, it's one of the biggest and highest-grossing games ever. Focused on capturing enemies and using them in turn-based battles, it has reached over 400 million registered users.

AdventureQuest (2002)



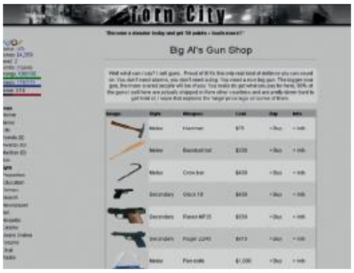
A single-player, free-to-play Flash-based RPG focused on fighting increasingly challenging turn-based battles. It had reached over 15 million accounts by 2006 and had several sequels, spin-offs and clones.

MapleStory (2003)



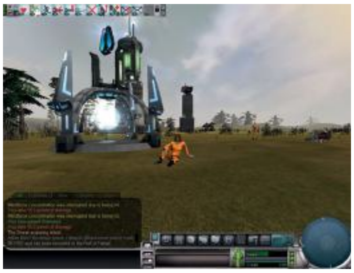
A hit (260 million accounts) free-to-play 2D MMO from Korea, combining cute graphics and side-scrolling platforming with action-RPG elements and online chat. It started a wave of similar MMOs.

Torn City (2003)



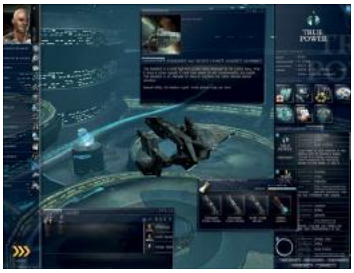
One of many browser games from the 2000s inspired by *Dope Wars,* it's an RPG/management game about starting your own criminal empire and fighting rival players/factions, reaching over 2 million players.

Entropia Universe (2003)



A controversial MMORPG, its in-game currency can be exchanged for real-world US dollars. Still active, it's famous for its expensive item sales (over $300,000) and for pioneering a "play-to-earn" model.

EVE Online (2003)



A space MMORPG where the economy, factions and politics are all run by its players. Still active, it's famous for its massive and costly wars, in which thousands of players fight over months for their factions.

If you're interested in the economics of virtual worlds like *EVE Online*, check the book *Virtual Economies: Design and Analysis,* by Vili Lehdonvirta & Edward Castronova

World of Warcraft (2004)

Remy "Two Times"

The titan that reshaped the game industry, setting the standard for how MMORPGs should be. Highly polished and accessible, it peaked at 12 million subscribers in 2010 and became a cultural icon.

Roblox (2006)

Capture Point

An online platform for creating and playing games, it hosts thousands of titles, including popular RP servers and RPGs, such as *Adopt Me!* (2017) and *Blox Fruit* (2019). Reached 162 million monthly players in 2022.

Fallen London (2009)

FALLEN LONDON
SUNLESS SEA

A unique and complex browser-based title, it's a narrative-driven and text-based RPG. Players get a limited number of moves each day to solve quests and explore the game's twisted Victorian-era London.

Dragon City (2012)

This social media game about raising and battling dragons was one of the most popular Facebook games, with over 450 million players. The Facebook version died in 2020 when Flash was retired, but it can be played on Windows and mobile.

WarFrame (2013)

One of the first looter-shooters, this is a co-operative third-person action RPG with a heavy focus on acquiring gear. Using a free-to-play model, it reached over 50 million players and became one of the most popular games on Steam.

Pokémon GO (2016)

A gaming phenomenon, it had an unprecedented impact on popular culture. Combining *Pokémon* tropes with augmented reality and using smartphone GPS and cameras as part of its gameplay, it expanded the horizons of what games can be.

WORLD OF WARCRAFT AND THE END OF HISTORY

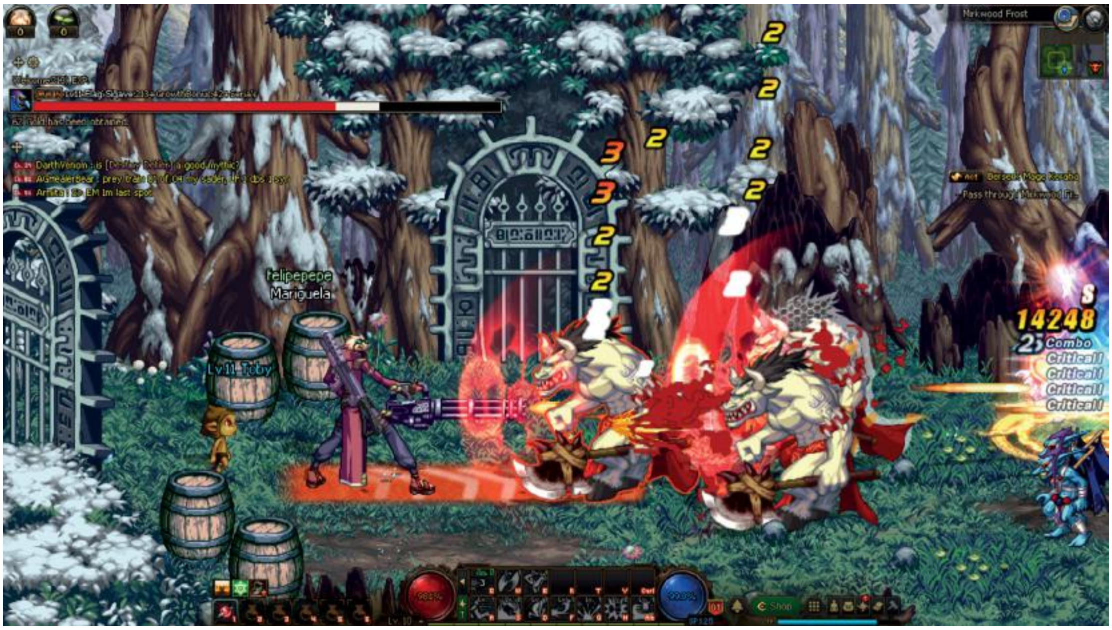
Released in 2004, *World of Warcraft* radically changed the industry. It brought in friendly visuals and an accessible UI, taking the best ideas from other games and polishing them into a winning formula.

But more than that, it streamlined the entire MMORPG experience, giving players a clear sequence of quests to complete. While previously they had had to repeatedly kill enemies to earn XP and level up, *WoW* made quests an optional way to progress, forming a semi-linear narrative full of iconic characters and lore. The quests also guided players across the game world, leading them to the content best suited for their level.

World of Warcraft would peak in 2010 at 12 million subscribers. By that point, it had become an icon, a part of popular culture – the ultimate MMORPG.

As *Ultima Online*'s designer Raph Koster puts it:

> *We built bugs by the tens of thousands. We tried to simulate ecologies and created environmental disasters. We built economies reading text books to master an impossible task, because our worlds were vast experiments.* Dark Age of Camelot, EVE Online, Star Wars: Galaxies, Project Entropia … *many worlds were rough, implausible, buggy and unfriendly.*
>
> *And in 2004, the game industry finally kicked us in the ass and brought us back to reality when Blizzard launched* World of Warcraft. *Polished, expert, slick, fun, it was the hack & slash game that nailed the form down … and collapsed the possibility space. It was, in some ways, the end of history.*



Dungeon Fighter Online (2005) is one of the biggest videogames of all time, with over 850 million registered users and $18 billion in lifetime revenue – more than famous IPs like GTA, WarCraft, James Bond or Marvel's Avengers

HISTORY MARCHES ON

Almost two decades after its release, *WoW* remains the icon of what an MMORPG is. It might have collapsed the possibility space of its genre, but MMORPGs are only one type of online RPG. The term itself is now used only by games that still follow the *EverQuest*/*WoW* formula, like *Final Fantasy XIV* (2010), *The Elder Scrolls Online* (2014), *Black Desert* (2015) and *New World* (2021).

Just a year after *WoW's* release, Nexon would release *Dungeon Fighter Online*, an online beat-'em-up RPG. It would reach 25 million active users in 2012 – far surpassing *WoW* as one of the biggest online RPGs ever, despite being mostly unknown outside of Asia.

An interesting feature of *DFO* is how it uses the same instanced approach as *Phantasy Star Online*, with city hubs full of players but dungeons only for you and your party. This approach would also make its way into another new type of online RPG: "looter-shooters" like *Hellgate: London* (2007), *WarFrame* (2013) and *Destiny 1* and *2* (2014 and 2017), combining *Diablo II's* loot system with shooter gameplay and instanced content.

Browser games also kept evolving, offering many different genres by the mid 2000s – strategy games like *Utopia* (1999), *Planetarion* (2000) and *Travian* (2004); sports management games like *Hattrick* (1997); online RPGs like *Combats* (*Бойцовский клуб*, 2002), *Kingdom of Loathing* (2003), *Gladiatus* (2007) and *Dragon's Call* (2010); fashion games like *Stardoll* (2004); narrative games like *Fallen London* (2009); and several crime games like *PimpWar* (1999), *Torn* (2003), *Omerta* (2003), *Mafia Wars* (2008), etc. Not to mention thousands of Java and Flash games.

When social media games like *FarmVille* (2008) exploded in popularity, several RPGs were developed with social elements and Facebook integration, such as *Monster Galaxy* (2010), *Deep Realms* (2011), *Dragon City* (2012) and *Marvel Avengers Alliance* (2012).

Traditional CRPG developers would also jump in. BioWare, for example, made *Dragon Age Journeys* (2009) and *Dragon Age Legends* (2011), two Flash-based tactical RPGs created to promote their *Dragon Age* series.

In December 2020, support for Flash ended globally due to safety issues and the move towards more mobile-friendly platforms. This effectively killed thousands of Flash games, including popular titles like *Dawn of the Dragons* (2012), an online RPG that was the most-played game at the Kongregate game portal.

However, by then, much of their audience had already moved into the mobile game space, thanks to the popularisation of smartphones and the rise of highly-polished free-to-play mobile games. Several new types of online RPG would appear and conquer massive audiences, such as *Puzzle & Dragons* (2012), *Roblox Mobile* (2012), *Monster Strike* (2013), *Summoners War (2014), Pokémon GO* (2016), *Lineage M* (2017) and *Genshin Impact* (2020).

The popularity of these games is on an entirely different scale: in its first year, *Pokémon GO* was played by more than 230 million players. *Roblox* gets accessed by 50 million users each day. And *Genshin Impact* regularly reaches over 60 million active monthly players as of 2022 – five times what *WoW* had at its peak.

It's impossible to predict what will come next, but it's clear that the history of online RPGs is far from over.

For more information on the history of online games, be sure to check the Game Archeologist blog and the nerdSlayer Studios' YouTube channel

RPG Maker: Over 30 years of indie RPGs

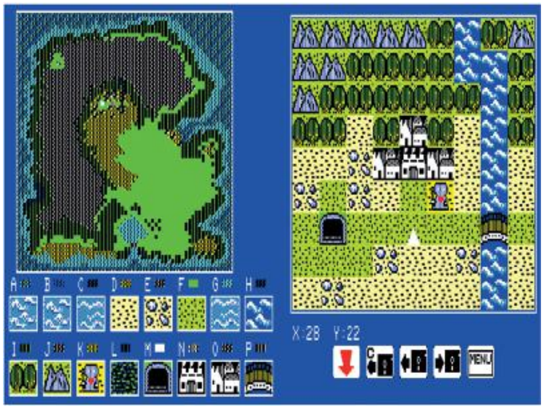
The story of *RPG Maker* (or RPGツクール) began back in 1987, when Japan's *Login* magazine published *Adventure Maker* (アドベンチャーツクール), a tool for creating text adventures for the PC-88 Japanese computer. As was common at the time, the software's code was printed on the magazine's page, for people to type into their own computers and use.

The software was successful, and the magazine would create other versions of it, such as 1987's *Dungeon Manjiro* (ダンジョン万次郎), a tool for creating *Wizardry* clones, and 1988's *Mamirin* (まみりん), that could create RPGs in the style of *Ultima*.

Dungeon Manjiro, *Mamirin* and *Dante* were sold in Japan using a popular service: software vending machines called TAKERU. You would insert money, select the software, and the machine would copy it onto a floppy disk or CD-ROM.

While they had a few interesting features such as a custom sprite creator, these tools were still primitive. Dungeons, for example, could only have walls or doors. Similarly, NPCs could only repeat a few lines of text.

Login magazine was published by ASCII Corporation, and in 1990 the company would release *RPG Construction Tool: Dante (*RPGコンストラクションツール Dante*)*. Made for MSX2 computers, it was a much more powerful tool, allowing users to add music, and customise spells and details like the stat progression, as well as craft complex stories.



The map creation tool of *Mamirin*, which allowed you to create very simple *Ultima* clones, with options for making top-down maps, first-person dungeons, NPCs, items and a few monsters

From then on, several sequels and ports were produced, for platforms such as the PC-98, Super Nintendo/Famicom, Windows, PlayStation and Gameboy Color. The series would also shorten its name to RPGツクール, or RPG Tsukūru – a pun, mixing the sounds of "tsukuru" (to make) and tool.

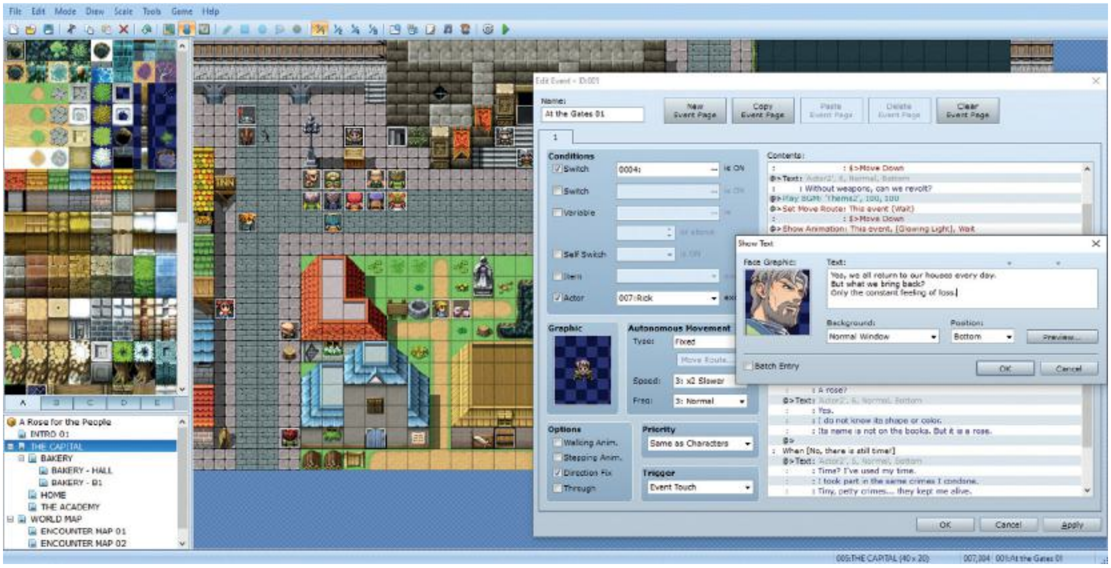
Packed with pre-made art, music and gameplay systems, the various versions of *RPG Maker* allow anyone to easily create a JRPG in the style of 16-bit titles like *Final Fantasy* and *Dragon Quest*. A user can import their own art and customise every part of the gameplay, or just use the included assets and systems to focus on other parts of the game.

Of course, it wasn't long before people began ripping sprites, music and other assets from their favourite series to create their own *Earthbound* sequel or *Dragon Ball Z* RPG. This was definitely a huge draw for the tool, and the reason why many first began making their own games – especially in the 2000s, when packs of ripped resources for *RPG Maker* were widely available online.

As fangames grew and gained popularity, companies like Nintendo and Square-Enix started sending cease-and-desist letters to ambitious projects like 2004's romhack *Chrono Trigger: Crimson Echoes*. Seeing this, parts of the RPG Maker community began to enforce a strong "no-rip" policy.

All this led to some prejudice towards the tool, as some users would rip assets from other games to create their own, or would flood digital stores like Steam and itch.io with hundreds of similar-looking *Final Fantasy* clones of poor quality.

But these are just side-effects of the popularity and accessibility of the tool. While it's perfect for making simple games, skilled developers can push it to its limits to create something truly unique.



Name: At the Gates 01

☑ Switch 0004: is ON
☐ Switch
☐ Variable
☐ Self Switch
☐ Item
☑ Actor 007:Rick

Type: Fixed
Speed: 3: x2 Slower
Freq: 3: Normal

☐ Walking Anim.
☐ Stepping Anim.
☑ Direction Fix
☐ Through

Priority: Same as Characters
Trigger: Event Touch

Contents:

```
:                    : $>Move Down
@>Text: 'Actor2', 6, Normal, Bottom
:        : Without weapons, can we revolt?
@>Play BGM: 'Theme2', 100, 100
@>Set Move Route: This event (Wait)
:                    : $>Move Down
@>Show Animation: This event, [Glowing Light], Wait
...
        : A rose?
  @>Text: 'Actor2', 6, Normal, Bottom
  :     : Yes.
  :     : I do not know its shape or color.
  :     : Its name is not on the books. But it is a rose.
  @>
: When [No, there is still time!]
  @>Text: 'Actor2', 6, Normal, Bottom
  :     : Time? I've used my time.
  :     : I took part in the same crimes I condone.
  :     : Tiny, petty crimes... they kept me alive.
```

Show Text

Text:
Yes, we all return to our houses every day.
But what we bring back?
Only the constant feeling of loss.

Background: Normal Window
Position: Bottom
☐ Batch Entry

005:THE CAPITAL (40 x 20) 007,004 001:At the Gates 01

The level editor and event tool of *RPG Maker VX Ace* (2013), displaying a map created using only the tiles, portraits and character sprites that come with the tool

The game that proved this was *Corpse Party* (1996), created in *RPG Maker Dante 98,* a 1992 version of the tool for the PC-98 Japanese computer. A horror game set in a high school, it showed just how flexible *RPG Maker* could be. Heavily focused on dialogue and atmosphere, it abandoned most RPG elements – characters have stats, but they're mostly useless, and there's only one battle in the game.

Corpse Party established many of the tropes in *RPG Maker* horror games, like monsters that chase the player and multiple endings based on which characters survive. It became a poster boy for *RPG Maker,* an icon among *doujin* (hobbyist games) and a cultural phenomenon in Japan, with seven sequels and several best-selling adaptations into manga, anime, novels, drama CDs and live-action movies.

Soon after, *RPG Maker* was being used to create all kinds of games and experiences, such as *Azusa 999*, an award-winning story about suicide, created in 1997 by a 19-year-old Japanese student. Official game design contests and the Japanese culture of *doujin* game circles (hobbyist groups) led to a strong development scene, especially for horror games – such as the viral hit *Ao Oni* (2008).

Originally a Japan-only title, *RPG Maker* first reached the West in the early 2000s, when a Russian student called 'Don Miguel' released fan translations of *RPG Maker 95* and *2000*. He was threatened with a lawsuit and forced to stop distributing them, but it was too late – his translations had already spread all across the Internet. An official English release would arrive only in 2005, when a company called Protexis released *RPG Maker XP* in English.

A versatile tool supported by a large community, *RPG Maker*'s many versions have been used to create a wide range of games: dramatic story-driven games like *To the Moon* (2011), puzzle games like *Palette* (1998) and *OneShot* (2014), autobiographies like *Path Out* (2017), visual novels like *Your Turn To Die – Death Game By Majority* (2017), and surreal experiences like *Yume Nikki* (2004).

While some are commercial releases, most are freely available at websites like the RPG Maker Network, which hosts over 5,000 games, and itch.io, with over 7,000 games. Moreover, *RPG Maker* has a very fractured community, spread across many forums, groups and languages. Countries like France, Japan, Germany, Poland, Vietnam, Italy, Thailand, China and Brazil have their own communities, with hundreds of games only available in their languages, as well their own websites, podcasts and fanzines.

Because of this fractured community, a game like *Vampires Dawn* (2001) can be a hit in Germany, with several sequels, novels and spin-offs, but remain mostly unknown elsewhere. Another example is the Japanese website called Game Atsumaru (ゲームアツマール), created in 2016, that allows visitors to play *RPG Maker* games directly from their browsers. There you can find games like *My Island* (ぼくらのアイランド, 2018), a semi-idle crafting game that has been played online over 35 million times.

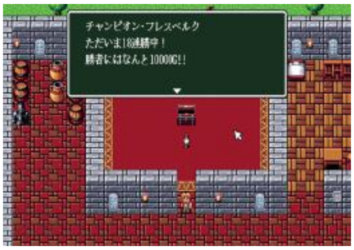
The main section of this book has already covered some of the big *RPG Maker* titles, such as *Super Columbine Massacre RPG!* (2005), *Lisa* (2014) and *Hylics* (2015), but the coming pages will list other important RPGs created with this legendary tool.

While *RPG Maker* is the most popular of the series, there are several other "Maker" tools, such as *Fighter Maker*, *Action Game Maker*, *Love Sim Maker* and *Shooting Maker*

There are alternatives to *RPG Maker*, such as *WOLF RPG Editor* (1998). A free tool, it was used to make famous horror games like *Mad Father* (2012) and *Misao* (2014).

Cock-A-Doodle-Doo (クック・ドゥ・ドゥル・ドゥー, 1995)

ASCII's first RPG Maker contest received 3,447 entries; the second, in 1996, had 3,741 entries and was won by *Corpse Party*



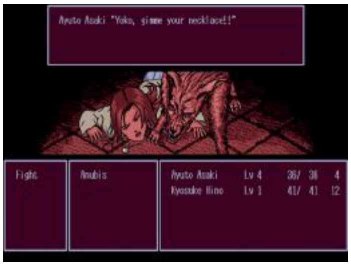
チャンピオン・フレスベルク
ただいま18連勝中！
勝者にはなんと1000G!!

The winner of ASCII's first RPG Maker Contest, held in Japan in 1995. Its creator, Nakanishi Byakuya, got over the severe limitations of the Super Famicom *RPG Maker* (RPGツクール Super Dante) by making a comedy RPG in which you play as Pal, the pet rooster of a rich boy gone broke. Together with a cat (that calls himself "God of Death"), you must help the boy recover his finances, alternating between the three characters.

One of the first noteworthy *RPG Maker* games, it also has a version for the PC-98 Japanese computer, created using *RPG Maker Dante 98*.

Peret em Heru: For the Prisoners (囚人へのペル・エム・フル, 1998)

You play as one of the tourists and can ask for other characters to tag along; each has unique stats and skills you might need to survive and save others



Ayuto Asaki "Yoko, gimme your necklace!!"

Fight

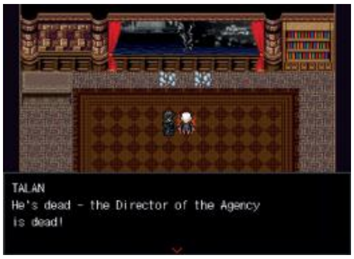
Anubis

Ayuto Asaki Lv 4 36/ 36 4
Kyosuke Hino Lv 1 41/ 41 12

Inspired by *Corpse Party*, this horror RPG has an obsessed professor using a group of eleven tourists to help him explore a hidden chamber in the Giza Pyramid. The game has a few RPG elements, such as random battles, stats and level ups, but the focus is on solving its puzzles by using adventure game-like commands (Pull, Push, Take, Crouch, etc.) to save as many of the characters as possible. Created by Makoto Yaotani using *RPG Maker Dante 98 II*, it won several game awards and became a cult classic.

A Blurred Line (2001)

The game was planned as a trilogy, but the last part was never completed, leaving some plot threads unresolved



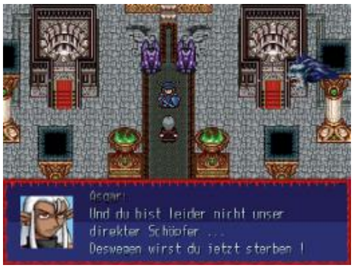
TALAN
He's dead - the Director of the Agency
is dead!

One of the first big western games to be made with *RPG Maker*, *A Blurred Line* is often voted one of the best free titles created with the tool. It puts you in control of Talan, a man on the run, accused of murdering The Director. Desperate, he has only one clue: "seek Paradise".

Developed by Lysander86 using a fan-translated version of *RPG Maker 2000*, the game delivers a solid sci-fi story, full of twists and branching paths that will affect the narrative and your companions.

Vampires Dawn: Reign of Blood (2001)

Vampires Dawn was a German-only title for many years; its English fan-translation would only appear in 2012

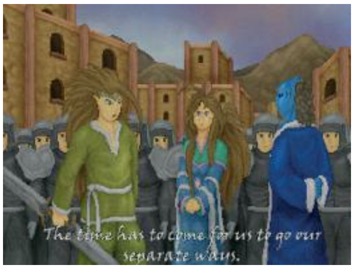


Asgar:
Und du bist leider nicht unser
direkter Schöpfer ...
Deswegen wirst du jetzt sterben !

Created by Alexander "Marlex" Koch using *RPG Maker 2000*, *Vampires Dawn* has you play as Valnar, a human turned into a vampire. A traditional JRPG with multiple endings based on your actions and morality, it became one of the most famous German *RPG Maker* titles, widely distributed in local CD-ROM magazines. A sequel was released in 2005, followed by two novels, three mobile game spin-offs, two browser games and several fangames. In 2018, Koch would also crowdfund *Vampires Dawn III: The Crimson Realm*, released in 2021.

Aëdemphia (2003)

Aëdemphia tells the story of Irzyka, the last survivor of her world, as she journeys across parallel dimensions



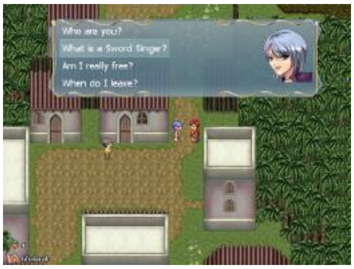
The time has to come for us to go our separate ways.

In development since 2002, *Aëdemphia* is one of the most famous games among the *RPG Maker* community. Created by French developer Sylvanor using *RPG Maker 2003*, the game has been drawing attention and winning awards since its first demo version in 2003. In the years since then, Sylvanor has kept steadily updating and expanding his project. It is still in development as of 2022, but already offers seven chapters and over 40 hours of an epic journey across multiple alien worlds, with some of the best visuals and music ever presented in *RPG Maker*.

Aveyond: Rhen's Quest (2006)

In 2004, writer Amanda Fitch released *Ahriman's Prophecy,* her first *RPG Maker* title. *Aveyond* is a continuation of that story, now as a commercial product. The game tells the story of a girl who gets sold as a slave and goes through several adventures that will reveal her destiny.

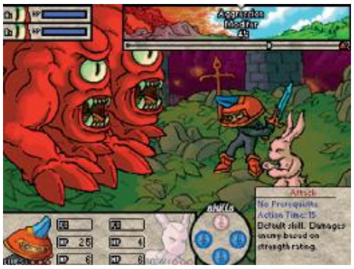
While its graphics and gameplay are simple, *Aveyond* succeeded in delivering a solid "16-bit JRPG" flavour during a time when new games of this type were rare, growing into a rather popular series with seven games – all created in *RPG Maker XP*.



Aveyond was one of the first commercial *RPG Maker* titles outside of Japan, released when indie games were extremely rare

Wilfred the Hero (2006)

Sunset Over Imdahl (2005) is a short adventure game that took the *RPG Maker* community by storm with its clever design and elegant presentation. Its creator, Teo Mathlein, then joined with developer/composer Brandon Abley to create *Wilfred the Hero,* a game that raised the bar for *RPG Maker* titles, with impressive hand-drawn art, a custom soundtrack and the touching story of a hero who feels inadequate. Chapter 1 was created on *RPG Maker 2003*, then the duo moved on to Unity, but the full game was never completed.



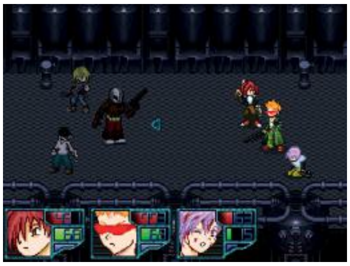
Default skill. Damages enemy based on strength rating.

Although it is unfinished, *Wilfred* became an icon for the potential of *RPG Maker*, using entirely customised art, music, combat system and UI

Alter A.I.L.A. (2007)

Created by Neok in *RPG Maker 2003*, this tells the story of nine prisoners forced to battle in a virtual arena. As they escape, the plot branches into three routes, each offering twists and betrayals. While it still uses a few assets taken from commercial games, it's a highly polished free title and one of the most iconic among the early western *RPG Maker* games.

In 2010 Neok released *Alter A.I.L.A. Genesis,* a remake that was even more popular, adding side-scrolling exploration and improved battles.

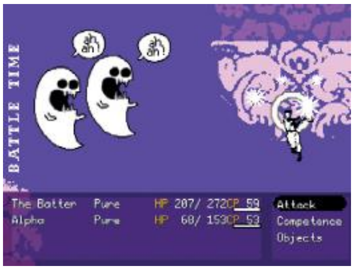


From the character designs to the soundtrack, *Alter A.I.L.A.* is like a time portal back to the Internet culture of the mid-2000s

OFF (2008)

A surreal RPG created by Belgian duo Mortis Ghost and Alias Conrad Coldwood, *OFF* casts you as The Batter, a cryptic man with a baseball bat who wishes to purify the world of spectres.

OFF became iconic for its quirky characters with surreal designs, an excellent soundtrack, fourth wall-breaking dialogue, and a clever plot twist about violence in videogames. And if all that sounds familiar, yes, the game was one of the main inspirations for 2015's *Undertale*. Released at first only in French, an English release arrived in 2011.

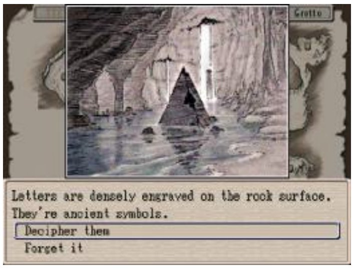

BATTLE TIME
The Batter Pure HP 207/ 272 CP 59
Alpha Pure HP 68/ 153 CP 53
Attack
Competence
Objects

The combination of *OFF*'s quirky creatures, exotic soundtrack and melancholic story was a landmark for indie games

Ruina: Fairy Tale of the Forgotten Ruins (Ruina 廃都の物語, 2008)

Created by Shoukichi Karekusa using *RPG Maker 2000*, *Ruina* is one of the most popular RPGs created with the tool in Japan. It combines traditional JRPG combat with inspirations from tabletop RPGs and Choose-Your-Own-Adventure books – you explore dungeons room by room, dealing with illustrated encounters and battles.

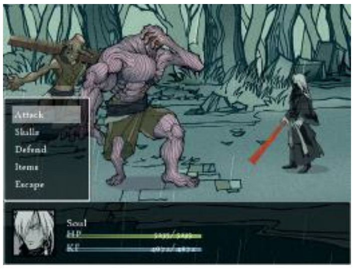
The game features four playable characters, each with their own story, and was later adapted into a two-part novel. *Ruina* was translated into English by fans in 2021, and a full remake was announced in 2022.



Letters are densely engraved on the rock surface.
They're ancient symbols.

Many events have multiple solutions, allowing you to use your skills or those of your companions

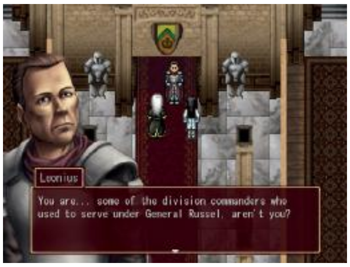
Rainblood: Town of Death (雨血之死镇, 2008)



Rainblood was one of the first international indies from China, being released in English in 2010 as a demo that asked for $9.99 to unlock the full game

An *RPG Maker XP* game by Soulframe, an architecture student in Beijing who was part of the massive 66RPG.com community of *RPG Maker* creators in China, which by 2013 hosted more than 1,500 games, *Rainblood* tells the story of Soul, an assassin in a town stricken by plague. The game was praised for its story and hand-drawn art, getting over 500,000 downloads. It had a 2011 sequel and then a prequel, *Rain Blood Chronicles: Mirage* (2013), made in Unity and released on Steam. Afterwards, it became *Phantom Blade* (影之刃) an ongoing side-scrolling action RPG series.

Exit Fate (2009)



Leonius

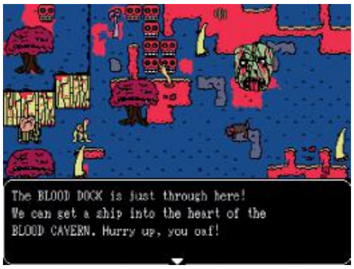
You are... some of the division commanders who used to serve under General Russel, aren't you?

Over a decade later, *Exit Fate* is still one of the biggest and most ambitious projects made with the tool

Exit Fate is an epic and elaborate 25+ hour RPG, heavily inspired by *Suikoden* and created by a single Dutch developer in *RPG Maker XP*.

It blends traditional JRPG battles – here with a party of six characters and a formation system – with large-scale tactical battles in which you control armies, as well as a having castle that the player must manage. In true *Suikoden* form, it offers a massive cast of 75 recruitable characters, plus some very challenging post-game content.

Space Funeral (2010)



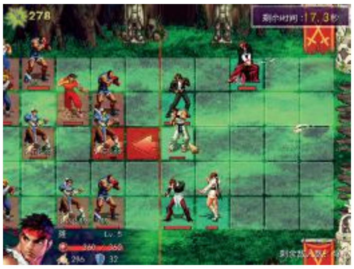
The BLOOD DOCK is just through here!
We can get a ship into the heart of the
BLOOD CAVERN. Hurry up, you oaf!

The game's visuals, characters and music are all weird and intriguing, serving as a counterpoint to the safety of retro games

Created by thecatamites in *RPG Maker 2003*, *Space Funeral* is a weird game. You play as Phillip, a crying boy wearing pyjamas. His world is a surreal land of ugly creatures, graphical errors and blood. Expelled from home, he joins forces with Leg Horse, a creature made only of amputated legs, to travel to the City of Forms and try to restore the world.

The game itself is very short and easy, but that's beside the point. What matters is its surreal presentation, excellent soundtrack and the powerful message it delivers against gamers' obsession with retro games.

Fighting Emblem (格斗纹章, 2010)

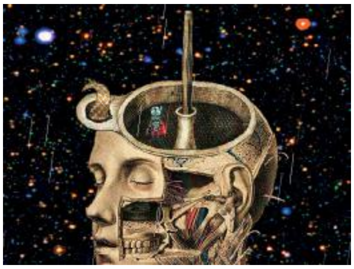


Fighting Emblem became very popular, with fans making expanded editions that added more characters and game modes

Made by 柳柳/LiuLiu, a founder of 66RPG.com, *Fighting Emblem* is a turn-based tower defence/RPG made in *RPG Maker VX*.

It features characters taken from series like *Street Fighter, Final Fantasy*, *King of Fighters* and *Hokuto no Ken*. Each has a different attack area or skill, and in each turn the player must re-position them in order to stop advancing enemy waves. Points are awarded based on the player's performance and can be used to improve characters and unlock new skills. LiuLiu went on to develop other *RPG Maker* games with similar systems.

Middens (2012)



Dense, divisive and absolutely unique, *Middens* remains one of the most visually striking *RPG Maker* games

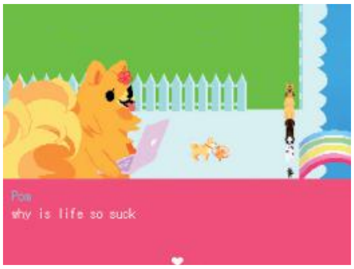
Created by myformerselves in *RPG Maker XP, Middens* combines the dream-like exploration of *Yume Nikki* with the anti-violence tones of *OFF*.

You start the game by talking to a sentient revolver, which will be your guide and weapon in your journey across the void. The void is a surreal landscape that is hard to navigate, with no goals at first. It's not clear even what is an enemy and what is just a bizarre NPC, but your revolver keeps pushing you to shoot everything – in and out of combat.

Pom Gets Wi-Fi (2013)

Created in *RPG Maker 2003* by Brianna Lei when she was 19 years old, *Pom gets Wi-Fi* is an extremely funny game about a very online Pomeranian. Killed in a fire, she goes to heaven and hates it – there's no wi-fi.

Short and based on simple puzzles, what really sells it is the sharp writing of its obnoxious and overly-dramatic protagonist. Every dialogue, quest and battle delivers a well-paced joke. *Pom gets Wi-Fi* quickly became the most popular game on RPGMaker.net, with over 200,000 downloads, and was translated into Portuguese, Chinese and Spanish.

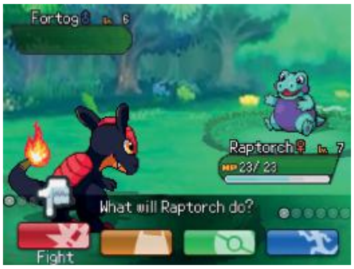

Pom
why is life so suck

Pom talks by mixing Internet slang, memes, anime references and random Japanese words; that some are now dated only adds to the obnoxiousness

Pokémon Uranium (2016)

In 2007, fans put together *Pokémon Essentials*, a pack of resources and art assets for anyone trying to make a *Pokémon* game in *RPG Maker XP*. Thanks to these community efforts, dozens of *Pokémon* fan games were made, each offering a few new twists to the formula.

Among these, *Uranium* stood out for its high quality and polish, being on par with the best official *Pokémon* games. Developed over nine years, the game adds 150 new Pokémon (for a total of 200 playable monsters), many difficulty options, and a new Pokémon type: Nuclear.



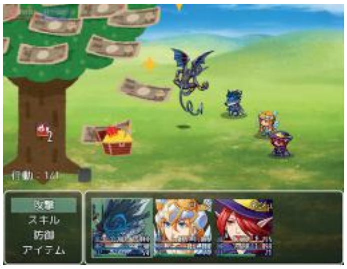
What will Raptorch do?

Pokémon Uranium was a viral hit, getting over 1.5 million downloads before being taken down by Nintendo, and was nominated "Best Fan Creation" at 2016's Game Awards

Money Tree (金のなる木, 2017)

A creative, combat-focused RPG, created by Hizuthu Sasha on *RPG Maker MV*. The game is based around attacking a giant tree that drops money with each hit – but also strikes back, summoning enemies and casting spells with various effects. Your goal is to get as much money as possible, then flee, buy better items, skills and stats – then fight again.

Available only in Japanese, it's playable online on the Game Atsumaru website and became one of its most popular RPGs, with over 800,000 plays.

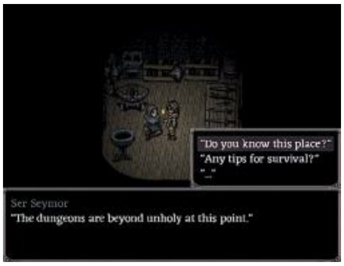


Battles are unpredictable, as in each turn the tree can summon enemies, cast spells, drop chests or start one of several special events

Fear & Hunger (2018)

An extremely dark *RPG Maker MV* game about doing everything to survive a deadly dungeon. You choose a class, go through a short CYOA segment that will define your stats, and then venture into the dark.

Inside the dungeon, you will have to scavenge food to survive and deal with diseases, phobias, and brutal monsters that might mutilate or even decapitate you with a single blow. Not for the faint of heart, the game features scenes of rape, self-mutilation, necrophilia and cannibalism. A sequel called *Fear & Hunger: Termina* was released in 2022.


"Do you know this place?"
"Any tips for survival?"
"..."

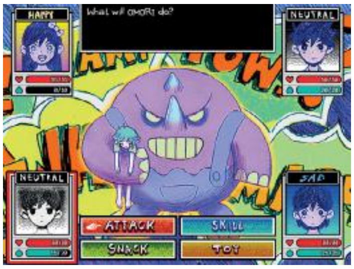
Ser Seymor
"The dungeons are beyond unholy at this point."

While you start alone, NPCs and even some enemies can be recruited into your party

Omori (2020)

Omori began in 2011 as a series of illustrations and blog posts about a depressed character created by an American illustrator, called Omocat. It grew into a comic book, and in 2014 became a Kickstarter project for an RPG. The project raised over $200,000 and was released in 2020.

Made in *RPG Maker MV,* the game is a surreal psychological horror RPG, mixing influences from *Earthbound* and *Undertale* with a heavy focus on character emotions, as it explores themes of depression and anxiety.


What will OMORI do?

Characters' current emotions play a role in combat as well, affecting their stats and vulnerabilities

1982-1987:
The birth of the Japanese RPG

Where does one begin when talking about the first Japanese RPGs? Well, surely with a game from 1982/1983. But which one? By 1982, companies like Koei, ASCII and Pony Canyon were already developing games for Japanese computers like the PC-8000, PC-8800 and Sharp MZ.

Dragon and Princess/ドラゴンアンドプリンセス (1982) is often pointed to as the first RPG made in Japan – created by Koei as a "Fantasy Adventure/Simulation Game", it blends text-based exploration with party-based tactical combat, something novel at the time.

However, we do not know its exact release date, so there are other early titles that could be considered to be the "first JRPG", depending on your definition, such as *Journey to the Centre of the Earth*/地底探検 (1982), in which you explore an underground world; *Mission: Impossible*/スパイ大作戦 (1982), a spy-themed game; *Dragon Lair*/ドラゴン・レア (1982), an import from the US; *Genma Wars*/幻魔大戦 (1983), based on a manga of the same name; or *King Khufu's Secret*/クフ王の秘密 (1983), a title similar to *Temple of Apshai*.

Hardcore Gaming 101 has a series of articles called the Dark Age of JRPGs where you can find detailed reviews of many of these early titles. Some of these games have only been found recently, so it's an evolving field.

It is interesting to note that Japanese developers were already experimenting with many settings and themes beyond classic fantasy. For example, *Seduction of Condominium Wives*/団地妻の誘惑 (1983) is an erotic RPG developed by Koei about a condom salesman visiting an apartment block, where he must knock on doors trying to "sell his products", while battling Yakuza and ghosts who roam the halls.

Genres were still being formed, so many of these games called themselves role-playing games, despite few having the traditional RPG features, like stats, XP, classes, etc. This quote by Tokihiro Naito (creator of *Hydlide*), found in the book *Japansoft: An Oral Story* (Alex Wiltshire, 2019), serves to illustrate the spirit that dominated Japanese game development at the time:

> *"When I created Hydlide, I had never played any Western games at all. Back then, Japanese people didn't have a defined sense of the RPG genre. I suspect the creators took the appearance of the RPG as a reference, and constructed new types of games according to their own sensibilities. I was inspired by* Advanced Dungeons & Dragons *and fairy illustrations in books from the West, and developed my own idiosyncratic view of the genre."*

Even those who had access to Western RPGs made very experimental games. Nihon Falcom began in 1981 as Apple importers to Japan, so they had access to the Apple II and its games. Later becoming developers, they jumped into the genre with *Panorama Island*/ぱのらま島 (1983), an exotic title that combines a hex-based overworld full of traps with wire-frame first-person dungeons (with automapping!).

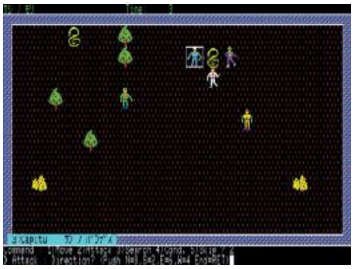
While *Panorama Island* sold itself as a "Fantasy Role-Playing Game", it lacks stats, XP and level-ups. You only manage your food and money. Overall, it plays more like a mix of platform and adventure games.

By 1983 we start seeing titles closer to traditional RPGs. Koei's *Dungeon* (1983) is basically an *Ultima* clone with obvious Western influences, as some of its monsters are taken directly from *D&D* books, like Mind-Flayers and Demogorgons. Other 1983 RPGs include *Legend of the Holy Sword*/聖剣伝説, *Sword and Sorcery*/剣と魔法 and *Poibos*/ポイボス.

In the end, the search for "the first" of anything depends heavily on one's definitions and can lead to very obscure releases that never had any real influence in the genre. Given this, the next pages will examine fifteen games that helped shape early JRPGs, moving them from curiosities on early Japanese computers to the console classics that would conquer the world.

Dragon and Princess

ドラゴンアンドプリンセス (1982)



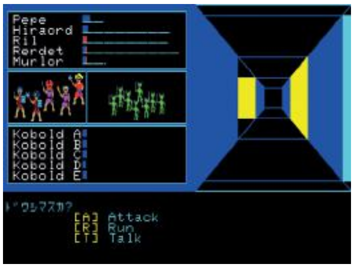
In possibly the very first JRPG, you are in charge of a hero and four companions who must hunt a group of bandits and then defeat a dragon.

Exploration is fully text-based, requiring you to input directions to move, as in early adventure games. During battle, the game shifts to a tactical top-down view with turn-based combat. Characters gain XP and grow stronger as they fight, and the gold you recover is your score.

An English fan-translation was released by NLeseul in 2019.

The Black Onyx

ザ・ブラックオニキス (1984)



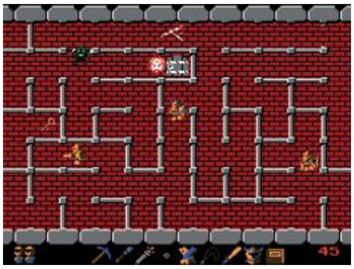
Dutch designer Henk Rogers moved to Japan and noticed a lack of traditional RPGs like *Wizardry*. So he decided to create his own.

While not "Japan's first RPG", as it's often claimed, it was their first popular CRPG, selling over 150,000 units, spreading the genre and influencing many developers.

It also pioneered allowing players to customise the character's appearance, displaying equipment on the character's avatar and using coloured bars to indicate health.

Tower of Druaga

ドルアーガの塔 (1984)



Namco's "Fantasy *Pac-Man*", this deceptively simple arcade game asks you to climb 60 floors of a tower.

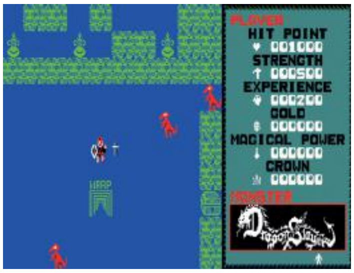
On each floor, you must grab a key and recover a hidden item, which requires a specific action – e.g. killing Slimes on Floor 1 yields a pickaxe, which can destroy walls.

Combat is done by "bumping" into foes, but beating some of them requires special items or strategies.

While it's not an RPG, *Druaga* is a cornerstone of Japanese action RPGs, as well as puzzle designs.

Dragon Slayer

ドラゴンスレイヤー (1984)

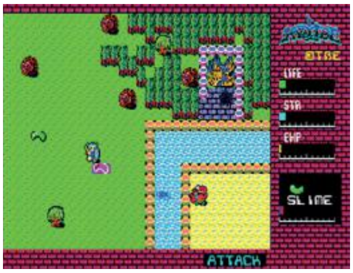


If *Tower of Druaga* was about secrets, Falcom's *Dragon Slayer* is about grinding. Heavily inspired by *The Caverns of Freitag* (1982), you're locked inside a huge dungeon and tasked with slaying a dragon. You start very weak, so your only hope is to slowly kill monsters and collect treasures, bringing them back to your home to increase your stats.

Combat uses the same bump system as *Druaga*, and there are useful magical items as well.

Hydlide

ハイドライド (1984)



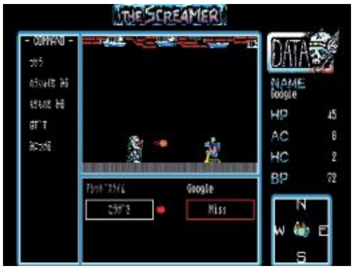
T&E Soft took *Tower of Druaga* and brought in colourful graphics, a fluid pace and a (tiny) open world for players to explore, bumping into foes in search of the magic items required to rescue the princess.

A massive hit in Japan, it's one of the most influential JRPGs of the '80s, often credited with introducing quick saves and regenerating health.

Released in 1989 in the US, it's often bashed for its mandatory grinding and frustrating difficulty.

The Screamer

ザ・スクリーマー (1985)



Set in a dark, cyberpunk world, *The Screamer* sends the player alone into an abandoned military lab full of mutants, robots and horrors.

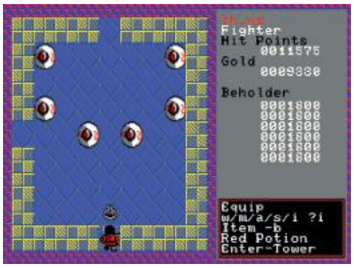
A hardcore dungeon crawler, it plays much like *Wizardry*, except for its combat: you fight monsters in real-time – shooting, jumping, ducking and blocking their attacks in innovative 2D side-view battles.

It also features eight unique NPCs, who roam the dungeon and each have their own agenda.

***The Screamer*'s characters were designed by manga artist Shohei Harumoto, who also made a short manga that came with the game, showing the hero's origin.**

Xanadu

ザナドゥ (1985)



While a sequel to *Dragon Slayer*, *Xanadu* changes almost everything, and influenced almost everyone.

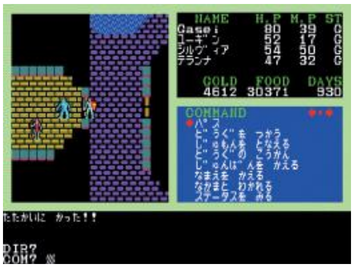
It adds a town where you can train individual stats, buy items and talk to NPCs. Beneath the town lies a large cave, which you explore in a platform-like side-scrolling view.

When you touch an enemy or enter a dungeon, the game goes into a top-down, arena-like view. Combat is still bump-based, but now there are spells, several items and even giant boss battles.

To this day, *Xanadu* is Nihon Falcom's greatest success; a PC-exclusive that sold over 400,000 copies in a time when PCs were rare and expensive.

Heart of Fantasy 2

夢幻の心臓II (1985)



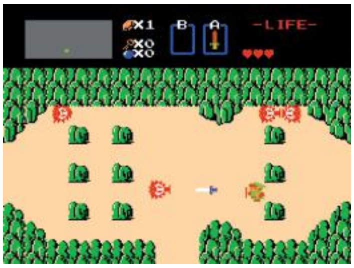
The original *Heart of Fantasy*, released in 1984, was one of Japan's many early *Ultima* clones.

The sequel plays like a blend of *Ultima III's* exploration and *Wizardry's* combat, but stands on its own achievements, featuring three large interconnected worlds, colourful artwork, tough battles and a great UI entirely based on menus.

It's a title that could've easily rivalled most Western CRPGs from 1985, but sadly was only released for Japanese computers.

The Legend of Zelda

ゼルダの伝説 (1986)



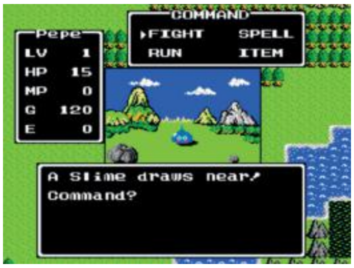
Shigeru Miyamoto and his team at Nintendo mixed *Hydlide* with *Xanadu*, removed nearly all the RPG elements and focused on the most important – the call for adventure.

They added an attack button, created a huge world full of secrets, designed clever dungeons, puzzles and boss battles, made magic items, altered gameplay and got rid of all the time-wasting grinding.

In doing so, *Zelda* began a new and highly influential style of action-adventure games.

Dragon Quest

ドラゴンクエスト (1986)



A Slime draws near!
Command?

Enix's *Dragon Quest* was the perfect game at the perfect time.

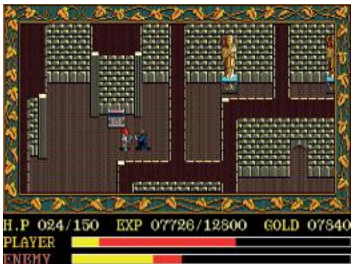
Created by Yuji Horii, a CRPG fan who wished to reach wider audiences, it blended *Wizardry's* first-person battles with *Ultima's* NPCs and open world, wrapped in a friendly, menu-based interface that allowed anyone to play RPGs.

Amplified by Akira Toriyama's unique art style, it sold over two million copies in Japan and set a new standard for JRPGs.

In 1990, Enix published a manga retelling *Dragon Quest's* development, titled ドラゴンクエストへの道. It's a fun read, and details the developer's admiration for *Wizardry* and *Ultima*.

Ys

イース (1987)



A team at Falcom thought RPGs were getting too demanding, so they created an action RPG focused on fun and adventure.

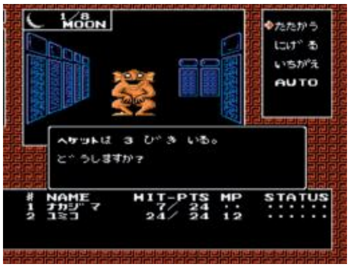
The result is a light-hearted RPG that's memorable, accessible (thanks to its bump combat) and packs an amazing soundtrack.

While overlooked in the west, in Japan it stands tall as one of the landmarks of the genre.

You can read a more detailed review of the *Ys* series on page 94.

Digital Devil Story: Megami Tensei

デジタル・デビル物語 ストーリー 女神転生(1987)



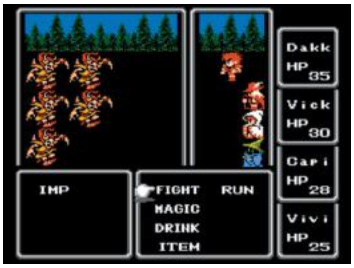
Based on a novel of the same name, *Megami Tensei* stars Akemi Nakajima, a teenage hacker who uses his PC to summon demons.

When the demons run out of control, it's up to Akemi and his girlfriend to stop them. Besides fighting, players can also try to recruit the demons, and then fuse them into more powerful demons.

A cult classic by Atlus, it would receive great sequels and spin-offs, including the *Persona* series.

Final Fantasy

ファイナルファンタジー (1987)



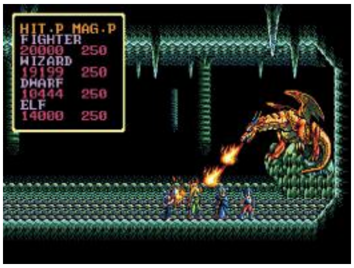
A young employee at Square, Hironobu Sakaguchi, was frustrated with his job and decided to bet everything on a final, sink-or-swim adventure.

Building upon the *Dragon Quest* formula, *Final Fantasy* is a massive game, in which four custom "heroes of light" travel the world – on foot, boat and airship – to purify the four elemental orbs.

While it didn't outsell *Dragon Quest I* in Japan, it would start the world's best-known JRPG series.

Sorcerian

ソーサリアン (1987)



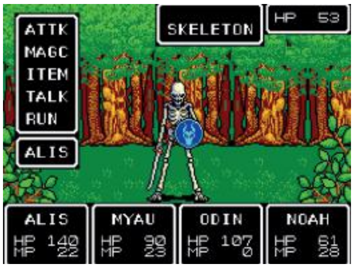
The fifth title in Falcom's huge *Dragon Slayer* series is an unusual side-scrolling action RPG in which you control the main hero and your party mimics your actions.

It has a rich RPG system with races, classes, skills, jobs, over 120 spells, hidden magical items, many status effects and even ageing.

Sorcerian is all based around adventure modules and became extremely popular, receiving many "Scenario Packs" that added new official and fan-made modules.

Phantasy Star

ファンタシースター (1987)



As the game starts, a cutscene shows Ali's brother being killed by soldiers of Lord Lassic. And so she swears to begin a revolution. Along the way, she'll gather three companions: Odin, a brutish warrior; Lutz, a presumptuous sorcerer; and Myau, a magical cat-like creature.

Developed by SEGA for the Master System, *Phantasy Star* was a title ahead of its time, pointing towards the future of JRPGs with its amazing graphics, memorable cast of heroes and evolving story.

The End of an Era

Nintendo's Famicom arrived in 1983 in Japan, followed by the SEGA Master System in 1985. After massive hits like *Dragon Quest*, *Final Fantasy* and *Phantasy Star,* the consoles became the definitive platform for JRPGs – and for Japanese games overall – a complete reversal of the situation in the US and Europe.

Even with the popularisation of 16-bit computers later on, computers were left to niche titles that made use of their amazing capabilities to render high-res still images – mainly strategy games, visual novels and erotic games – including JRPGs like *Dragon Knight* and *Rance*. Falcom was one of the few remaining companies still focused on PC JRPGs, which might help explain why they are barely known in the West.

As a result, Western CRPGs lost their relevance to Japanese players and developers – *Dungeon Master, Wasteland, Daggerfall, Baldur's Gate, Fallout, System Shock 2, Deus Ex, Morrowind* and other seminal classics either never made it to Japan or failed to leave an impact. Even *Ultima Underworld* was barely noticed in Japan – with From Software's *King's Field* series being the closest thing it ever got to a Japanese descendant.

Only towards the end of the '90s would western titles like *Diablo* and *Ultima Online* have a clear influence on popular JRPGs like *Phantasy Star Online*.

Wizardry, on the other hand, gained new life in Japan. While Sir-Tech crumbled away in the '90s, Japanese companies acquired the series' licence and produced over 30 *Wizardry* games, remakes and spin-offs, plus novels, manga series, anime, toys, mobile games, tabletop RPGs and even an MMORPG.

Note, however, that these games and their clones all follow the classic formula, up to *Wizardry V* (1988). The changes made in *Wizardry VI–8,* such as having an open world or going fully 3D, were never embraced.

For those interested in this subject, Kurt Kalata's *Guide to Japanese Role-Playing Games* is the best English book on the subject. If you can read Japanese, then the *OLD GAMERS HISTORY Vol. 3 & 4* books published in 2013 are essential reading, covering over 200 RPGs from 1983 to 2000. Also check 日本デジタルゲーム産業史, a 2016 book that gives a local in-depth perspective on the history of the Japanese game industry.

Expanding the canon: The rich world of non-English RPGs

If you are from an English-speaking country, you probably never gave much thought to languages in your games – at most, you might have wanted an obscure Japan-only import. Yet, most people cannot play their favourite games in their own languages.

For example, *Skyrim* is one of the most popular RPGs of all time, but it's only officially available in 9 languages, even after a decade of re-releases. Similarly, the *Mass Effect* games only offer 8 languages, missing some of the most common languages in the world. Their speakers still have to learn a second language or rely on groups like Tribo Gamer, which does fan translations of modern games into Portuguese.

To read more about videogame history abroad, we highly recommend the book *Video Games Around the World* (2015), as well as *Gaming the Iron Curtain* (2018) and *Video Games and the Global South* (2019). Polygon also made several articles on the game industries of countries like Iran, Sweden, Peru and Cuba, among others.

If things are still like this today, imagine 30 years ago, when computers were still a novelty, how exciting it was to have a game in your language, that you could fully understand – and that referenced your own culture!

In the '80s, several countries got their first games, made by bedroom coders trying to express themselves or emulate their favourite foreign titles. Countries like the US, UK, Japan, France and Germany already had well-established computing scenes and managed to evolve their amateur games into large companies that exist to this day. But it was still far too soon for others, their early games becoming obscure historical artefacts that only reached small hobbyist clubs.

The early '90s would offer a perfect chance for more scenes to emerge across the world – IBM PCs with VGA graphics were powerful, accessible and popular; imported titles were hard to get; and games were still relatively easy to develop. This allowed many local developers to be successful with games in their own language, about things that mattered to them – like *İstanbul Efsaneleri,* made by a young Turkish team to reflect the tumultuous times they were living in.

Copyright laws were still lax or non-existent, so many studios began by translating, porting or copying foreign games. CD Projekt RED is famous for starting in 1994 as a pirate group doing Polish translations of foreign games, but this was also happening in Russia, the Czech Republic, South Korea and Taiwan. After years of forming teams, managing logistics and learning the ropes, they began making their own.

As the next pages will show, a game like 1990's *Xuan-Yuan Sword* might look like a simple Taiwanese *Dragon Quest*, but it was an exciting new release for its players and a vital stepping stone for its developers to establish their own style of game and develop one of the biggest game industries in the world.

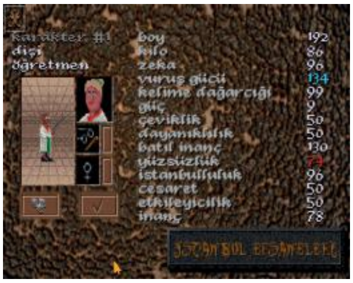
This doesn't mean that all countries made RPGs, as other genres were more popular and easier to make. Also, countries like Turkey, Italy, Hungary, Finland and Spain had local RPG pioneers who are fondly remembered by those who played the games at the time – a few are shown on the next page – but they were mostly isolated releases.

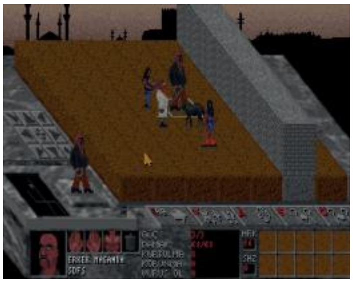
And while countries like Russia and Germany managed to translate and publish most of their RPGs across the world, other countries never managed to go global and have English releases, becoming overlooked gaps in the "western canon" of videogame history.

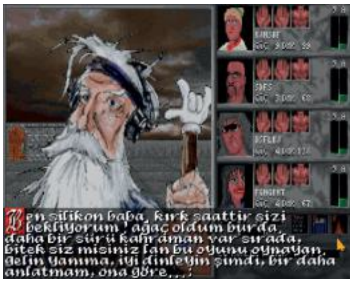
Things have improved with digital distribution, with games like Cameroon's *Aurion: Legacy of the Kori-Odan* (2016) being widely available in English, but there are still many gaps in our knowledge and perception, especially from the Arab world and Asia.

As such, the next few pages will focus on three countries with strong RPG scenes and many games that were never translated: France's early and highly experimental '80s releases; South Korea's "package" industry; and the massive Chinese RPG scene.

İstanbul Efsaneleri: Lale Savaşçıları (1994)


Karakter #1
dişi
öğretmen
boy 192
kilo 86
zeka 96
vuruş gücü 134
kelime dağarcığı 99
güç 9
çeviklik 50
dayanıklılık 50
batıl inanç 130
yüzsüzlük 79
istanbulluluk 96
cesaret 50
etkileyicilik 50
inanç 78

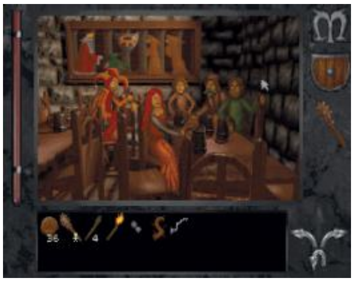



Ben silikon baba, kırk saattir sizi bekliyorum, ağaç oldum burda, daha bir sürü kahraman var sırada, bitek siz misiniz lan bu oyunu oynayan, gelin yanıma, iyi dinleyin şimdi, bir daha anlatmam, ona göre...!

A Turkish dungeon-crawler, inspired by games like *Realms of Arkania*. The game is set in modern-day İstanbul, where your party of workers, teachers, punks, prostitutes, intellectuals and government officials join forces to battle against a wave of ignorance and lies taking over the city. It uses extremely local cultural references, such as spells using regional slang. For example, "gel babana" (come to papa) works as a "Dominate" spell. One of the first videogames from Turkey, it was first developed for the Amiga then ported to MS-DOS in 1995.

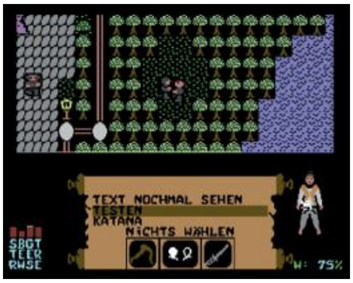
Read the full interview on felipepepe.medium.com with the developer of *İstanbul Efsaneleri* about the game's development and its reception in Turkey

Asmodeus: Tajemný kraj Ruthaniolu (1996)



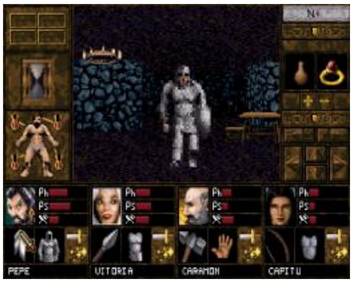
A Czech RPG/adventure hybrid, mixing real-time dungeon crawling with an outside world full of NPCs and puzzles like *Myst*'s. From the same creators as *Dračí Historie* (1995), a popular Czech adventure game.

Nippon (1985)



A German-only RPG about a Japanese salaryman who travels back in time to feudal Japan. The game has a massive world, and a character system based on visiting shrines and solving riddles.

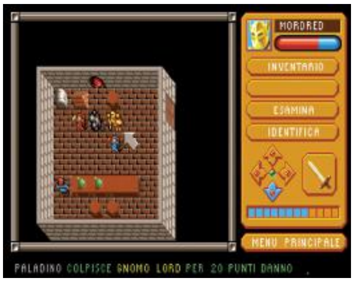
Rol Crusaders: Búsqueda del Hereje (1995)



A Spanish DOS dungeon-crawler about Templars fighting Inquisitors. It's quite simple, but has a complex character system, meant to be used to play the RPG boardgame that came bundled with the game.

Rol Crusaders was never officially translated, but it had an English demo. By importing files from the full Spanish game, it's possible to play all levels in English.

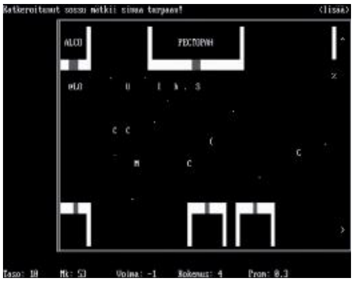
Time Horn: Il Corno del Tempo (1991)



PALADINO COLPISCE GNOMO LORD PER 20 PUNTI DANNO

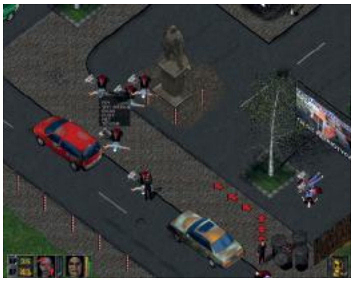
An Italian RPG for the Amiga. The game is fully turn-based. You play as the knight Mordred, doing several missions to get gold, XP and recruit companions until you are ready to handle the final mission.

SpurguX (1987)


Katkeroitunut sossu mätkii sinua turpaan! <lisää>
Taso: 10 Mk: 53 Voima: -1 Kokemus: 4 Prom: 0.3

A Roguelike from Finland about a drunkard crossing town in search of a bottle of cognac. You fight policemen and very stereotypical passersby while trying to keep a high level of alcohol in his blood.

Rezerwowe psy (1999)



A Polish tactical RPG similar to *Jagged Alliance 2*, where you control a group of paid killers. It was highly controversial due to its violence, profanity and mockery of Polish politics, celebrities and media.

Rezerwowe psy's engine was reused for 2003's *The Troma Project*, a tactical RPG based on movies from US horror studio Troma Entertainment, famous for *The Toxic Avenger*

French RPGs: An early explosion of creativity

The book *Epopée - Tales from French Game Developers* (2019) examines the early years of the French game industry and interviews several of its pioneers. Also check Polygon's video on the topic and *Beyond the French Touch*, a 2021 article by Filip Jankowski.

The French RPG scene stands out from that of any other country. Most made a few *Ultima* clones in the '80s and then had a golden age of PC RPGs in the '90s and early 2000s. But not the French. Their RPG production peaked in the late '80s, for early computers such as the Amstrad CPC and the Commodore 64.

The country was pushed into the computer age thanks to the 'Informatique pour tous' (computing for everyone) program of 1985, which saw the government buy 120,000 computers to equip French schools. This, plus the arrival of the Amstrad CPC 464 computer at accessible prices, led to a peak in interest for computers.

The Amstrad wasn't popular in the US, UK or Japan, and the Apple II had flopped in France. This incompatibility of platforms, plus the language barrier and the difficulties of importing foreign games, allowed French games to evolve into their own thing.

Scholars have struggled to define this "French touch" that marked the country's game production in the '80s, especially its adventure games. Many titles combined counter-culture tropes, humour and biting political messages, dealing with topics like slavery, rape, the Berlin Wall, homosexuality and South American dictatorships, as well as parodying local politicians.

Another contribution to the "French touch" was its comic-book inspirations – mainly from European comics, Robert E. Howard's *Conan* and some Japanese manga. This was encapsulated in the famous *Métal Hurlant* magazine. Created by legendary artist Mœbius, it combined sci-fi comics with articles on movies, books, music, visual art and games, later serving as basis for the US magazine *Heavy Metal*. Artists and writers who worked on the magazine would sometimes also work on games, making *Métal Hurlant* a pillar for a part of the early French game industry.

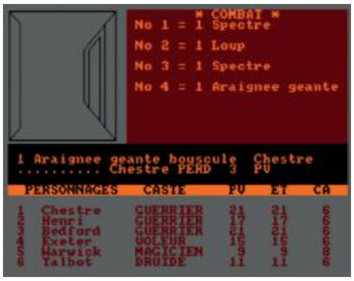
This "French touch" is most notable in adventure games – French RPGs weren't nearly as disruptive. Still, they combined unique visuals with adventure game tropes, exploring the boundaries of how an RPG should play – be it *Mandagore* fusing HP, stamina and mana into a single stat that decreases as you act, or *Zone* offering a party with 16 members, motorcycle battles and dungeon-crawls. These wild concepts were abandoned as RPG design conventions consolidated.

Since these games were still relatively simple, the French RPG scene was driven by a handful of very active developers such as Ulysse – the pseudonym of the creator of *Tera: La Cité des Crânes* (1986), *Karma* (1987) and *Zone* (1988) – or Hervé Lange, creator of *Fer & Flamme* (1986), *L'Anneau de Zengara* (1987) and the *B.A.T.* series (1989 and 1992). Ulysse published their games with Loriciels, and Lange with Ubisoft.

Another important studio for French RPGs was Simarillis, which released *Crystals of Arborea* (1990) and the *Ishar* series from 1992 to 1994. After these games, RPG production in France would come to a halt, with Simarillis moving on to make the innovative survival game *Robinson's Requiem* (1994), then action games like *Asghan: The Dragon Slayer* (1998) and *Arabian Nights* (2001). There would still be popular French RPGs, such as *Darkstone* (1999), a 3D *Diablo*-clone, and *E.Y.E: Divine Cybermancy* (2011), an FPS/RPG hybrid, but these are few and far between.

Of course, the French game industry would still march on, with classics such as *Another World* (1991), *Alone in the Dark* (1991), *Little Big Adventure* (1994), *Flashback* (1995) and *Rayman* (1995). These helped France become one of the biggest game producers in the world, but the "French touch" was purged in the process and now survives only in a few indie gems.

Tyrann (1984)

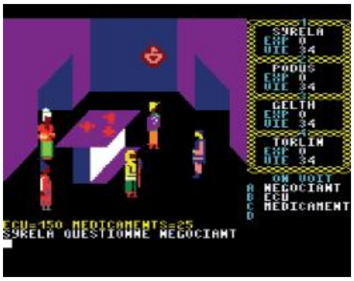


```
        * COMBAT *
No 1 = 1 Spectre
No 2 = 1 Loup
No 3 = 1 Spectre
No 4 = 1 Araignee geante

1 Araignee geante bouscule  Chestre
.......... Chestre PERD  3  PV
```

	PERSONNAGES	CASTE	PV	ET	CA
1	Chestre	GUERRIER	21	21	6
2	Henri	GUERRIER	17	17	6
3	Bedford	GUERRIER	21	21	6
4	Exeter	VOLEUR	15	15	6
5	Warwick	MAGICIEN	9	9	8
6	Talbot	DRUIDE	11	11	6

A *Wizardry*-clone for Oric and Amstrad. It has a 10-floor dungeon, with the last floor being a special challenge. It got a sequel in 1986 and a remake for Android in 2015.

Mandragore (1985)

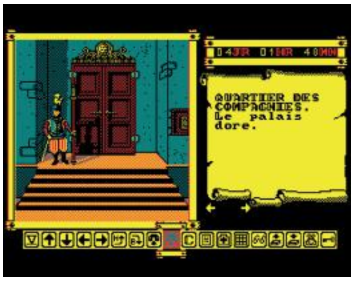


1 SYRELA EXP 0 VIE 34
2 PODUS EXP 0 VIE 34
3 GELTH EXP 0 VIE 34
4 TORLIN EXP 0 VIE 34
ON VOIT
A NEGOCIANT
B ECU
C MEDICAMENT
D

```
ECU=150 MEDICAMENTS=25
SYRELA QUESTIONNE NEGOCIANT
```

Infogrames' first RPG is a mix of *Ultima*'s overworld with hundreds of side-view screens controlled by an adventure game-like text-parser. It was also released in English.

Fer & Flamme (1986)



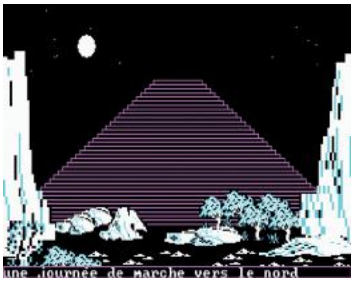
04JR 01HR 40MN

QUARTIER DES COMPAGNIES. Le palais dore.

In Ubisoft's first RPG, you create your party then explore a large open world, collecting artefacts to defeat a demon. It's ambitious and has great art, but lots of bugs and a terrible UI.

Fer & Flamme was a big hit in France, selling over 10,000 copies. Yves Guillemot, the president of Ubisoft, estimates that 10,000 more were pirated.

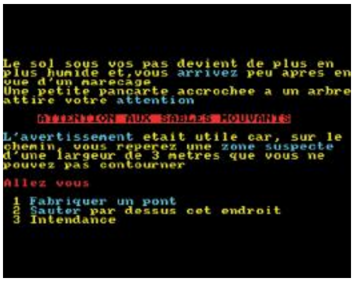
Tera: La Cité des Crânes (1986)



une journee de marche vers le nord

A very unique RPG for MS-DOS that feels somewhat like *Ultima* in first-person, as you travel across a large world recruiting NPCs, then descend into dungeons, go to space and even travel to other dimensions.

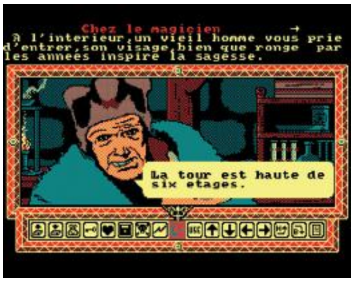
Faïal: Chevalier du Levant (1986)



```
Le sol sous vos pas devient de plus en
plus humide et,vous arrivez peu apres en
vue d'un marecage
Une petite pancarte accrochee a un arbre
attire votre attention

    ATTENTION AUX SABLES MOUVANTS

L'avertissement etait utile car, sur le
chemin, vous reperez une zone suspecte
d'une largeur de 3 metres que vous ne
pouvez pas contourner

Allez vous

 1 Fabriquer un pont
 2 Sauter par dessus cet endroit
 3 Intendance
```

A deep, text-based RPG in which you create a character and inherit a magical sword. It mixes CYOA with autoplaying combat and is one of several text adventure/RPGs from French developer Excalibur.

L'Anneau de Zengara (1987)



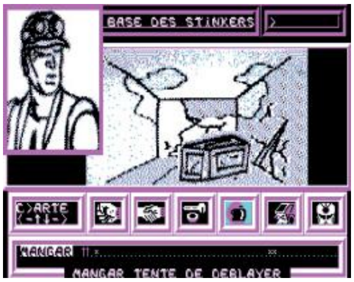
Chez le magicien

A l'interieur,un vieil homme vous prie d'entrer,son visage,bien que ronge par les annees inspire la sagesse.

La tour est haute de six etages.

The follow up to *Fer & Flamme*, it has a smaller scope, with a single hero exploring a tower. It's heavily inspired by the *Conan* comics in both content and style, being played through comic book-like images.

Zone (1988)

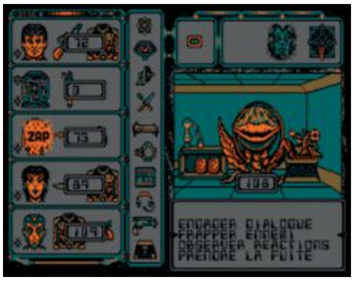


BASE DES STINKERS
CARTE
MANGAR

MANGAR TENTE DE DEBLAYER

An odd *Mad Max*-inspired RPG in which you manage a gang of bikers that has trade routes, fights gangs and invades enemy bases that you explore by dungeon-crawling.

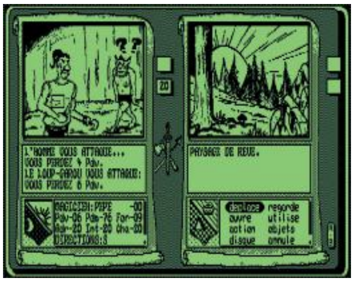
Le Maître Absolu (1989)



ZAP
ENGAGER DIALOGUE
FRAPPER ENNEMI
OBSERVER REACTIONS
PRENDRE LA FUITE

A Ubisoft sci-fi dungeon crawler for the Amstrad CPC. Its combat is simple and there's little character development, but its colourful art and setting create a nice atmosphere.

Saga (1990)

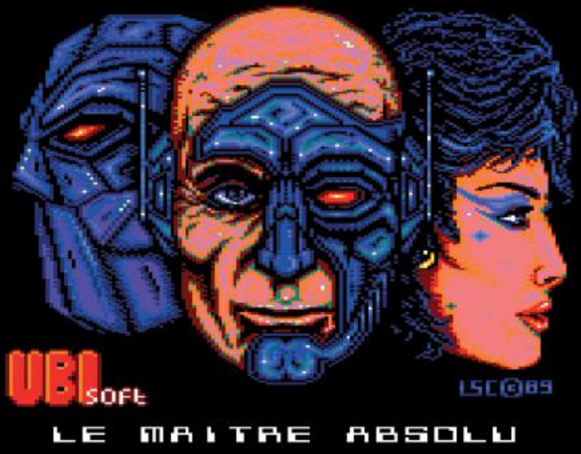


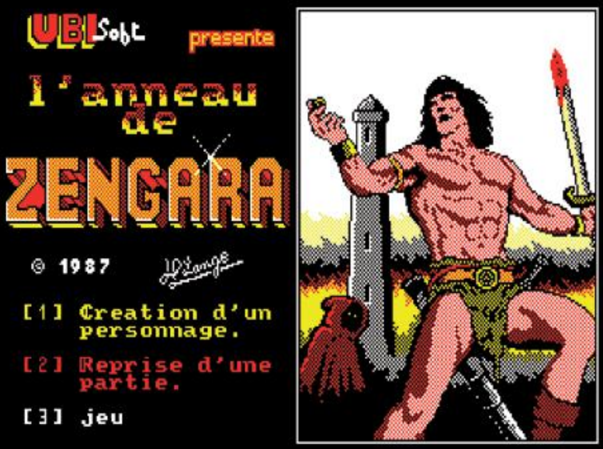
L'HOMME VOUS ATTAQUE...
VOUS PERDEZ 4 Pdv.
LE LOUP-GAROU VOUS ATTAQUE:
VOUS PERDEZ 6 Pdv.

PAYSAGE DE REVE.

20
deplace
regarde
ouvre
utilise
action
objets
disque
annule

A point-and-click adventure/ RPG hybrid for the Amstrad CPC. It uses high-res monochrome graphics and is made to be played in split-screen by two players.

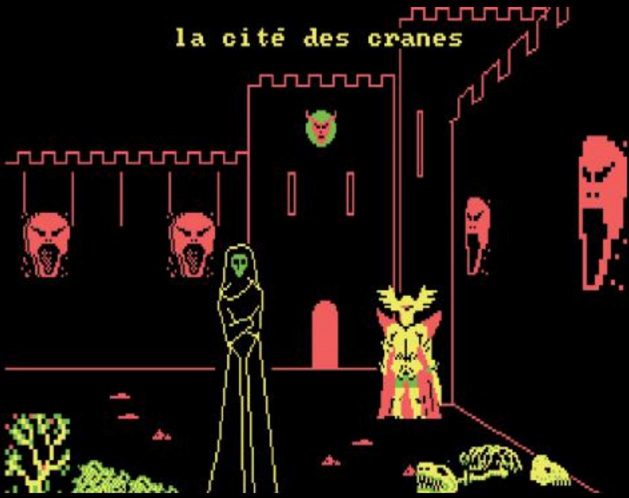

UBI soft
LSC©89
LE MAITRE ABSOLU

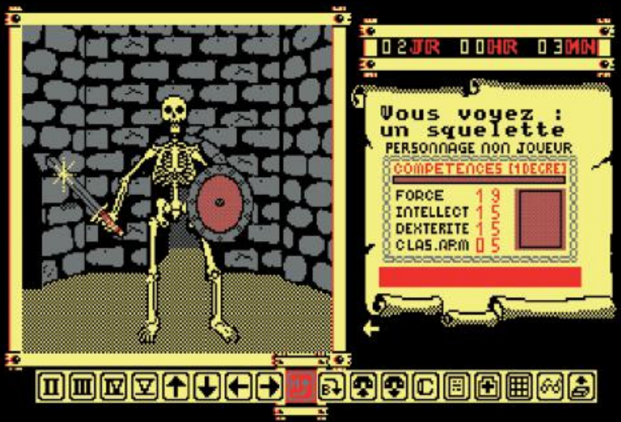

UBI Soft presente
l'anneau de ZENGARA
© 1987

[1] Creation d'un personnage.

[2] Reprise d'une partie.

[3] jeu


la cité des cranes


02JR 00HR 03MN

Vous voyez : un squelette

PERSONNAGE NON JOUEUR

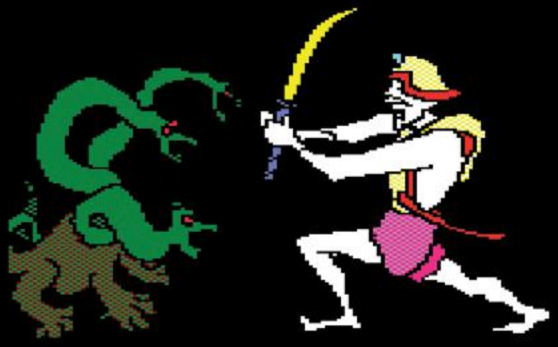
COMPETENCES (1DEGRE)

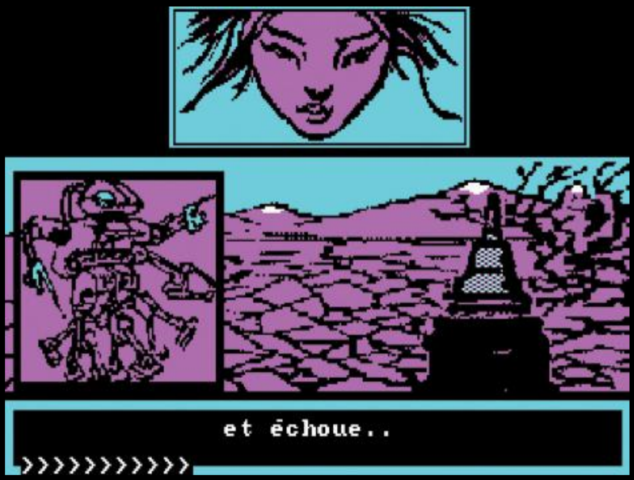
FORCE 19

INTELLECT 15

DEXTERITE 15

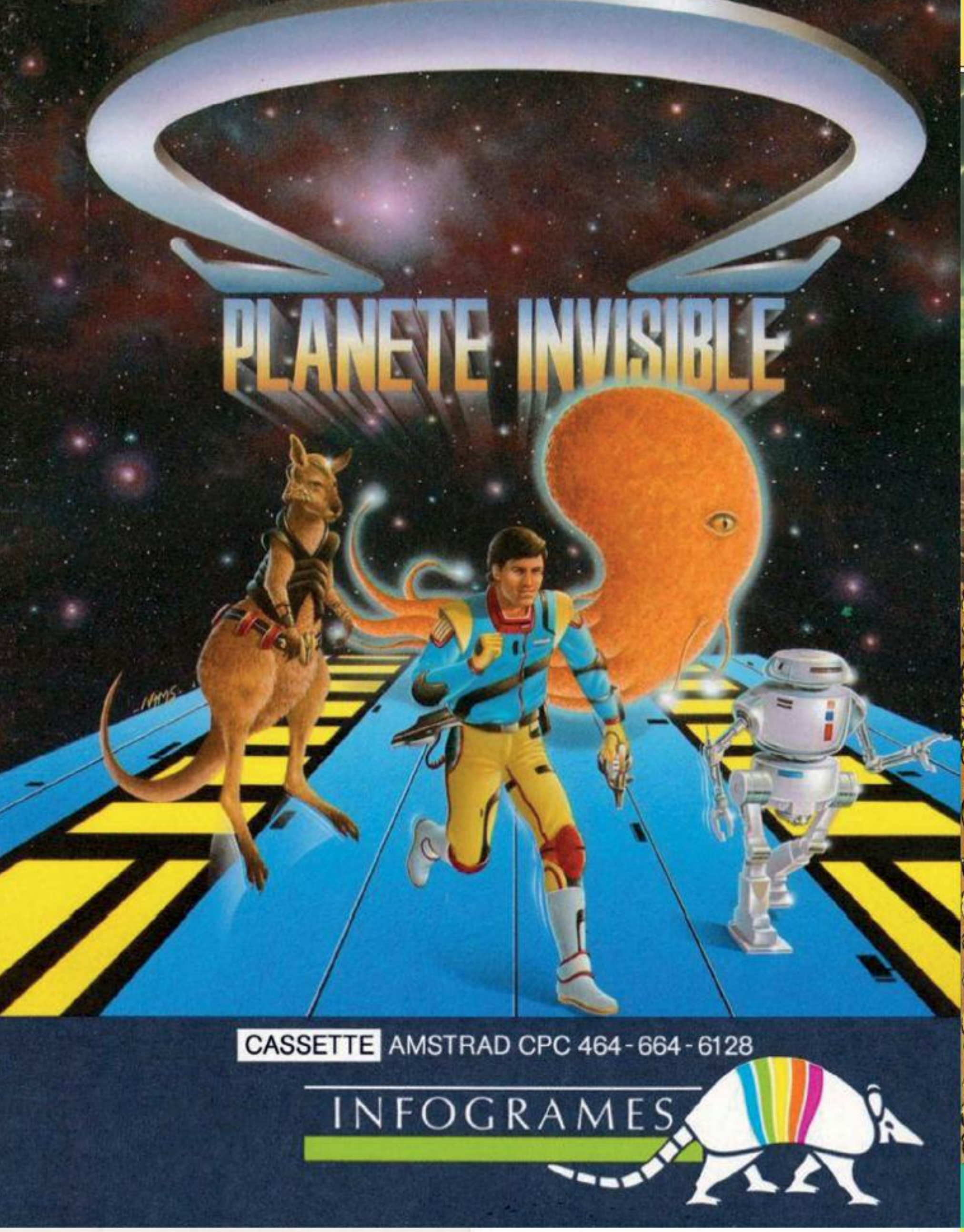
CLAS.ARM 05

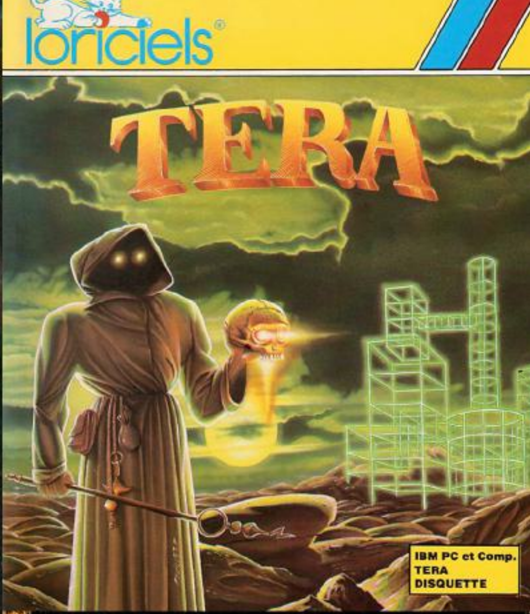


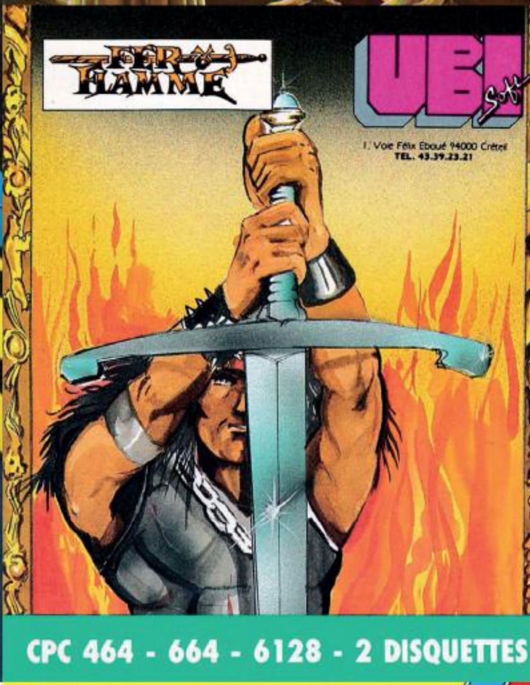


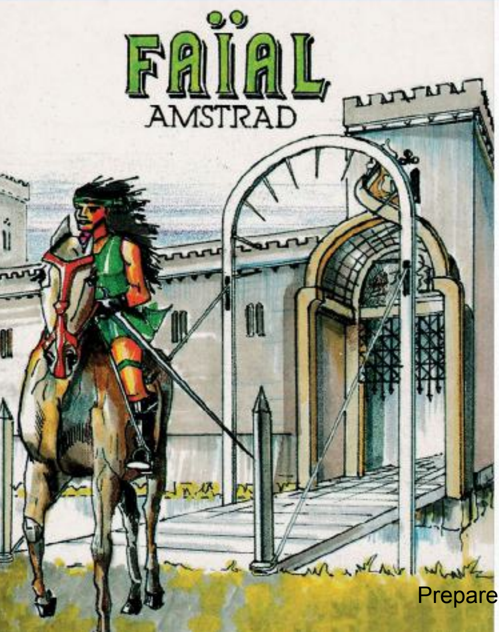
et échoue..

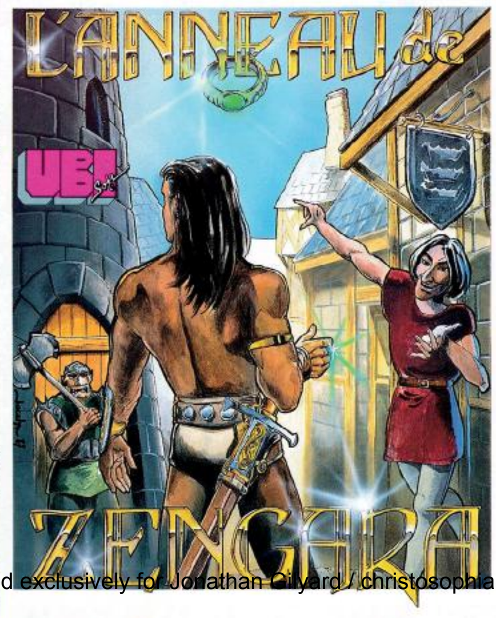
A selection of early French RPGs: screenshots of *Le Maître Absolu*, *L'Anneau de Zengara*, *Tera: La Cité des Crânes*, *Fer & Flamme*, *Faïal: Chevalier du Levant* and *Karma*; box art from *Oméga: Planète Invisible*, *Tera: La Cité des Crânes*, *Fer & Flamme*, *Karma*, *L'Anneau de Zengara* and *Faïal: Chevalier du Levant*.

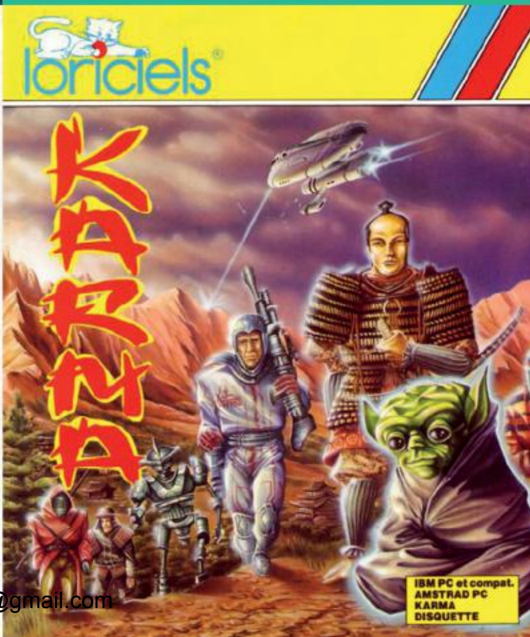

PLANETE INVISIBLE
CASSETTE AMSTRAD CPC 464-664-6128
INFOGRAMES


loriciels
TERA
IBM PC et Comp.
TERA
DISQUETTE


FER & FLAMME
UBI Soft
1, Voie Félix Eboué 94000 Créteil
TEL. 43.39.23.21
CPC 464 - 664 - 6128 - 2 DISQUETTES


FAÏAL
AMSTRAD


L'ANNEAU de
UBI Soft
ZENGARA


loriciels
KARMA
IBM PC et compat.
AMSTRAD PC
KARMA
DISQUETTE

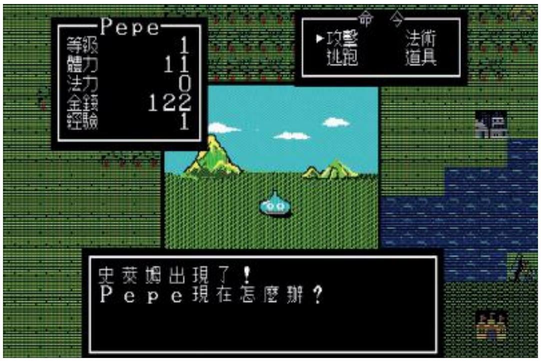
Chinese RPGs:
A treasure long overlooked

To talk about "Chinese games" is to deal with three main regions – mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan – each with very unique development studios and socio-economic scenarios. For example, consoles were banned in mainland China from 2000 until 2014 – naturally, there was a black market – but were available in Taiwan and Hong Kong.

Moreover, it means dealing with two writing systems: Traditional Chinese, used in Taiwan and Hong Kong (and Macau); and Simplified Chinese, used in mainland China (and Singapore):

	Wind	Country	Open	Love
Traditional	風	國	開	愛
Simplified	风	国	开	爱

Nowadays, games usually offer both systems in the options menu, but before that it meant that a game from mainland China would be weird for a Taiwanese person to read, for example. So regions typically had separate releases, usually with different publishers.



Pepe
等級 1
體力 11
法力 0
金錢 122
經驗 1

史萊姆出現了！
Pepe現在怎麼辦？

The unofficial MS-DOS port of *Dragon Quest I*, renamed *Dragon Fighter*, for which the developers didn't have access to the source code; they redid the entire game from scratch, dealing with the limited EGA colour palette

The core of the region's gaming industry began in Taiwan, during the mid-'80s. While they had access to some western games, like *Ultima* and *King's Quest*, the language barrier made them very hard to play. To solve this, a group of gamers began printing translated manuals to sell with their unlicensed/pirate copies (copyright laws were very loose at the time).

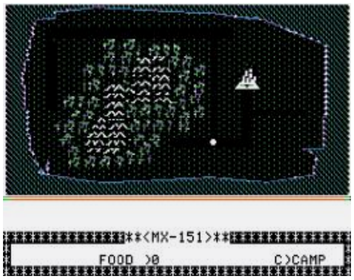
This business grew quickly, and by 1986 had expanded into Jingxun Computer Magazine (精訊電腦), a game magazine that also advertised these products, offering tips on how to play them and walkthroughs.

As had happened with companies like CDProjekt in Poland, GSC Game World in Ukraine and Akella in Russia, Jingxun would move from pirate copies to bootleg translations, and then to original titles. Under the name Kingformation Co., they reached out to the emerging domestic developer scene, commissioning a translated port of *Dragon Quest* for MS-DOS as well as publishing a few original Taiwanese games.

One of Jingxun's founders left in 1988 to start his own game magazine and publishing combo, Softstar (大宇資訊). However, under threat of sanctions from the US, Taiwan revised its copyright laws in July 1989. That was the end of companies openly selling unauthorized copies and translations. Kingformation started to focus solely on game publishing, and other pirate groups would soon follow, such as Soft-World (智冠科技), which began making official publishing deals with US developers.

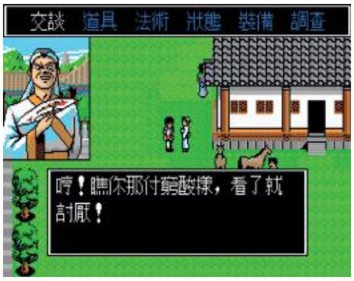
Now full-time game publishers boasting strong bonds with starting developers across all of Taiwan, these three companies started releasing several games per year. Softstar would stand out, with early hits such as *Monopoly* (大富翁, 1989) helping them grow into one of the country's biggest game companies.

MX-151
星河戰士 (1987)



A very primitive sci-fi RPG, this combines an *Ultima*-like overworld map with tactical turn-based battles. Published by Kingformation Co., it was probably the first Chinese RPG.

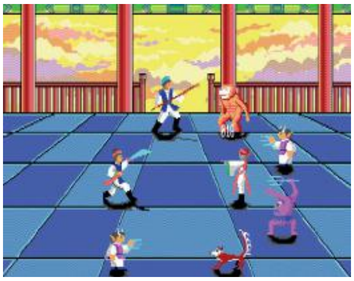
Xuan-Yuan Sword
軒轅劍 (1990)



哼！瞧你那付窮酸樣，看了就討厭！

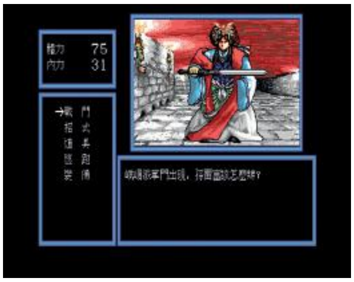
Although it's a *Dragon Quest* clone with a simple story, Softstar's first RPG is already quite professional. Its "xianxia" setting stands out, mixing martial arts with fantasy elements.

Eight Swords of Shenzhou
神州八劍 (1991)



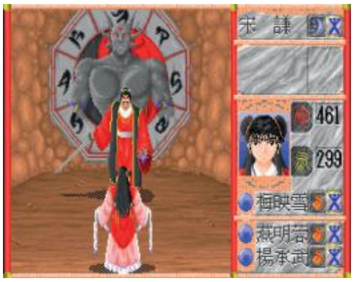
A simple *King's Bounty* clone by Soft-World, in you visit towns to recruit armies, then battle enemies to earn money for larger armies, until you manage to unite the land.

Legend of the Chivalrous Hero
俠客英雄傳 (1991)



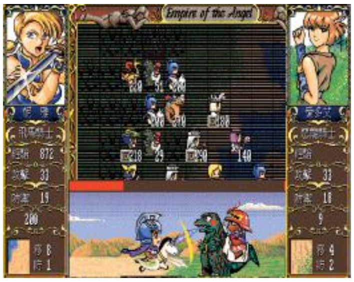
A more primitive *Dragon Quest* clone from Kingformation Co. You play as a lone martial arts hero who travels the land defeating evil-doers. You can choose one of five maidens to marry, each offering a boon.

Book of the Sword Saint
天外劍聖錄 (1992)



A more complex RPG by Softstar. You're the last survivor of a martial arts sect, trying to uncover the mystery behind its destruction. It was praised as a full wuxia (martial arts heroes) novel in RPG form.

Empire of the Angel
天使帝國 (1993)



Also by Softstar, this is one of the first tactical RPGs to come out of Taiwan. Featuring only female warriors, it was inspired by games like *Fire Emblem* and *Langrisser*, getting several sequels and a remake in 2000.

THE GOLDEN AGE

Despite the large output, few of these early games can be called classics, being far behind what other countries were developing at the time. But they served as foundation for the industry, establishing teams and series that would mark the country's history.

A turning point began in 1995, when Softstar released the most famous and important of all Chinese RPGs: **仙劍奇俠傳**, translated either as *Chinese Paladin* or *Legend of Sword and Fairy* (also known as *PAL95*).

There are many reasons why it's such a landmark, but a key element is that it established a model for what a Chinese RPG should be, as *Dragon Quest* did in Japan. Moreover, not only it was comparable to international RPGs, in some ways it was ahead of them.

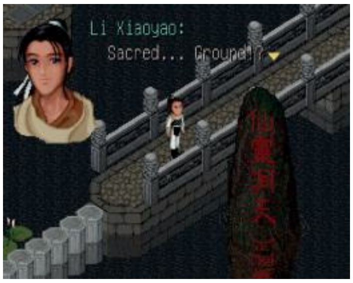
Its narrative was far more mature than that of other games from the era, especially when compared to western RPGs, using a novel structure to tell a romantic story without relying on traditional videogame tropes.

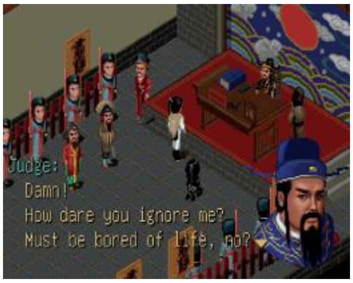
The release of *Chinese Paladin* also marked the start of a golden age, especially in the RPG genre. From 1995 until the early 2000s national game production would increase exponentially, with several new series being established and reaching their peak, including in the tactical and strategy RPG sub-genres.

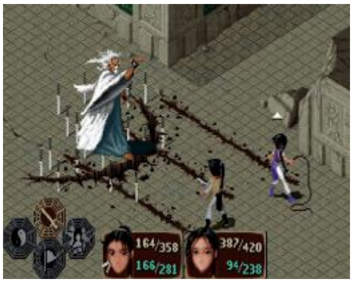
The next pages will highlight six important RPGs released during this period. While barely known in the west, some of these are as iconic to Asians as games like *Final Fantasy VII, Diablo* or *Baldur's Gate.*

Chinese Paladin (a.k.a. Legend of Sword and Fairy) - 仙劍奇俠傳 (1995)

Chinese Paladin was so popular in China that from 1996 to 2002 it was voted by readers of local Popsoft Magazine (大众软件) as one of the best games ever made


Li Xiaoyao:
Sacred... Ground!

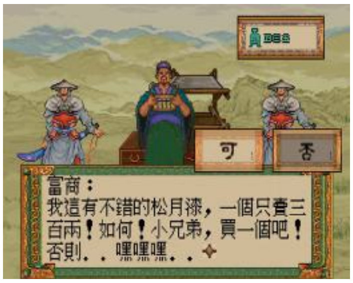

Judge:
Damn!
How dare you ignore me?
Must be bored of life, no?



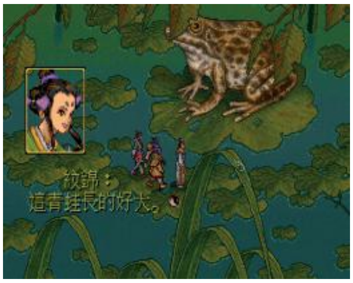
The most important of all Chinese RPGs. A polished, engaging and emotional game, *Chinese Paladin* tells the story of a man who travels to a mystical island in search of medicine for his aunt, then meets and marries a young woman, only to lose his memory the next day. It was a touching story, expertly mixing xianxia with romance and solid game design, setting the foundation for a series that is still going strong. It has had multiple TV show adaptations, a 2001 remake and was recently translated by fans into English. For a full review, see page 626.

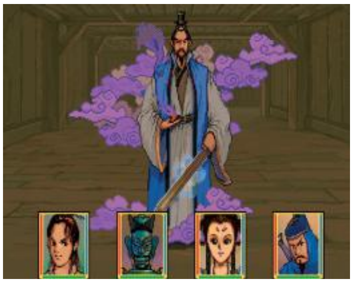
Xuan-Yuan Sword: Dance of the Maple Leaves - 軒轅劍外傳：楓之舞 (1995)

Xuan-Yuan is one of the names of the Yellow Emperor, a legendary figure considered to be the father of Chinese culture



富商：
我這有不錯的松月漆，一個只賣三百兩！如何！小兄弟，買一個吧！否則．．哩哩哩．．

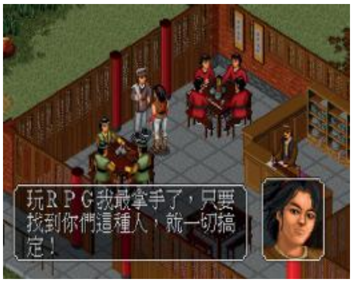

紋錦：
這青蛙長的好大。

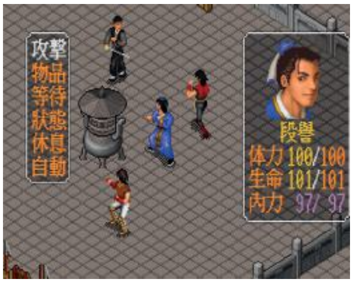


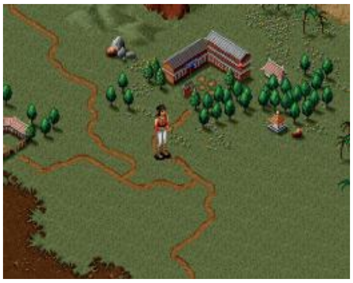
Xuan-Yuan Sword 2 was published in 1994 to positive reviews, even getting released in Japan and Korea. But it was its spin-off, *Dance of the Maple Leaves,* that stood out among the series' early entries. The game is set in a period known as The Hundred Schools of Thought, a time around 400 BC when multiple philosophers roamed China. The player is an apprentice of famous philosopher Mozi (founder of Mohism), who will explore this world full of historical and mythical figures such as Lu Ban (a legendary inventor), trying to prevent a war.

Heroes of Jin Yong - 金庸群俠傳 (1996)

Heroes of Jin Yong was quite ahead of its time, being an open-world RPG with multiple endings before games like *Fallout* popularised the concept


玩RPG我最拿手了，只要找到你們這種人，就一切搞定！





Developed by Taiwan-based Heluo Studio, this is an open-world RPG in which your character is a gamer sent into a world formed from the novels of famous wuxia novelist Jin Yong (one of China's best-selling authors – his most famous work, *Legends of the Condor Heroes*, is extremely influential and had several videogame adaptations). You must learn martial arts and collect all of his novels, with characters from those books helping or attacking you depending on your moral choices. The game earned cult status and a long-lasting modding scene, with players adding more characters and creating ambitious fan-made sequels, such as 2014's *Heroes of Jin Yong 5*.

Xuan-Yuan Sword 3: Beyond the Clouds and Mountains - 軒轅劍參：雲和山的彼端 (1999)

Xuan-Yuan 3 follows a traditional JRPG formula, but tells a very international story: you play as Septem, a Frankish knight who is tasked by King Pepin the Younger to find a legendary power able to win all wars. His journey takes him from Venice to Damascus, then along the Silk Road all the way to China, recruiting a colourful cast of companions inspired by Chinese myths, Christianity and Hinduism. It's considered one of the best and most accessible games in the *Xuan-Yuan Sword* series.

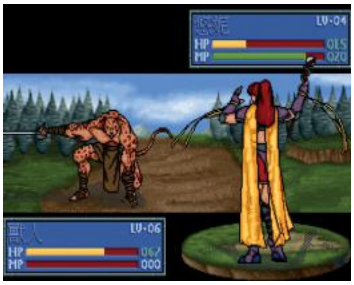
Tribulation of Heaven and Earth: Prequel (a.k.a. Castle) - 天地劫序傳：幽城幻劍錄 (2001)

Part of the *Tribulation of Heaven and Earth* series by Zealot Digital (formerly known as Dynasty International), this is a cult classic known for its extremely difficult battles and puzzles, sharp pixel art, multiple endings, satisfying combat and a long and elaborate story about the pursuit of love versus the burdens of fate. *Castle* has a devoted fanbase, who consider it the most complex and polished RPG ever to be made in China. A fan-translation was in the works by Verve Fanworks in 2011 but, sadly, the project was never completed.

Legend of Wulin Heroes - 武林群俠傳 (2001)

Heluo Studio's second game, this combines the non-linearity of *Heroes of Jin Yong* with mechanics from *Princess Maker* to create what's basically a "Wuxia Hero Maker": your character joins a martial arts school, where you choose how to train and which weapon and martial style to follow, and get lessons on Chinese culture, in subjects such as calligraphy, acupuncture or how to play *Go*. Between lessons, you venture into the world, helping people, playing minigames, befriending other martial artists and carving your own path into legend – or infamy, as the game has many routes and endings. It got a remake in 2015 called *Tales of Wuxia* (page 520).

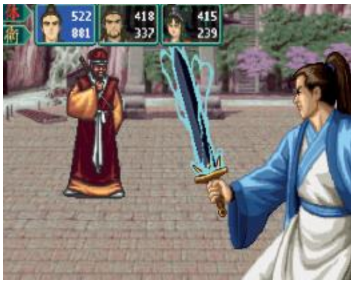
Flame Dragon 2: Legend of Golden Castle
炎龍騎士團2黃金城之謎 (1995)



Flame Dragon 2 was re-released for iOS and Android in 2014, quickly reaching over 500,000 downloads

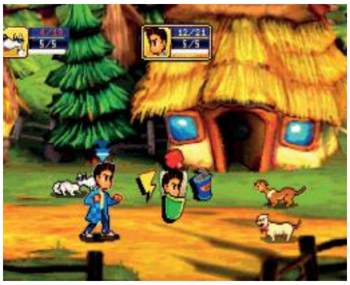
The first game, released in 1994, was a hit, but the sequel is even better. The "Chinese *Fire Emblem*" is a fantastic and challenging game, with great 2D art and lots of secrets.

Legend of the Chivalrous Hero 3
侠客英雄传3 (1997)



The last RPG by Kingformation, it has a well-done traditional wuxia story, presented via amazing pixel art and animations, and got a remake for Windows XP in 2004.

Tun Town
阿貓阿狗 (1998)



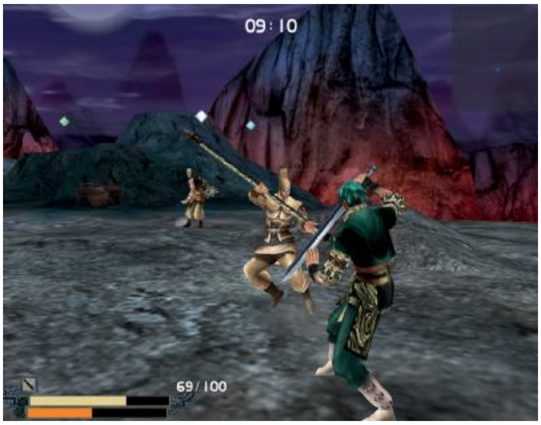
A colourful RPG about a boy who can talk to animals, created by the same team as *Chinese Paladin*, it's a lighthearted adventure with great pixel art and a lot of charm.

THE END OF THE GOLDEN AGE

There are several games on display in these pages, but it's important to understand that China's production during this era was massive – over 200 Chinese single-player PC RPGs were released in the '90s & 2000s!

While the industry was mostly oriented towards PCs, they also had a few console RPGs. China is famous for its bootleg scene, with games like *Chrono Trigger* and *Final Fantasy VII* being ported to the humble NES (a cheaper and more widely available console), but they also produced several original games, such as *Water Margin* (水滸傳, 1995), *The Story of Arthur* (亞瑟傳説, 1995) and *Investiture of the Gods* (封神英傑傳, 1996).

Sadly, barely any Chinese RPG ever received an English release (or even a fan-translation), as they are extremely difficult and costly to translate. They are wordy, focusing heavily on dialogue, with several games having heroes that recite poetry and Buddhist teachings, or reference events from China's extensive history. And the language itself is one of the hardest to translate.



Blade Meteor was a massive hit in China, but although It had an international release, this arrived years later via a small publisher, failing to achieve any popularity

That briefly changed in the early 2000s, with the arrival of real-time RPGs such as *Blade & Sword*, *Prince of Qin* (review on page 328) and *Seal of Evil*. The focus on action made them attractive to foreign publishers in search of a new hit (*Prince of Qin* was advertised as "*Diablo* with a history lesson"), making them some of the few Chinese RPGs to ever reach Europe and the US.

While most of these translations are very poorly done, these deals could've been the start of more regular and ambitious exports. Alas, it was too late – the entire single-player market was about to vanish.

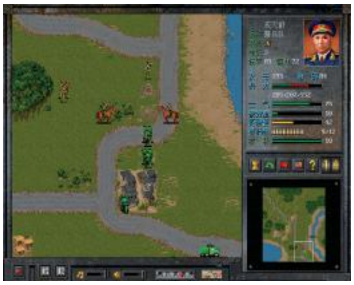
While all these single-player games were being released, a new world of online gaming was taking shape. Internet cafés were booming across the country, not only with *Counter-Strike, StarCraft, Diablo II* and other international titles, but also with *Meteor Blade* (流星蝴蝶劍*.net*), a 2002 martial arts action game that could be played online, leading to fierce arena duels.

China also already had some experience with MUDs, the online text-based role-playing games. One of its most popular MUDs, *King of Kings* (萬王之王), began in 1996 at the National Tsing Hua University of Taiwan, then in 1999 was turned into a graphical MMORPG, quickly growing popular – reportedly, reaching 10,000 concurrent players a month after release, at a time when *Ultima Online* and *EverQuest* had around 100,000 total subscribers each.

This growing online scene was first dominated by MUDs such as *Eastern Fantasy 2* (東方故事2, 1994), and *Ode to Gallantry* (俠客行, 1995) then began being taken by imports such as *Stone Age Online* (ストーンエイジ,1999), *The Legend of Mir 2* (미르의 전설 2, 2001) and private servers for games like *Ultima Online*.

Decisive battle for North Korea

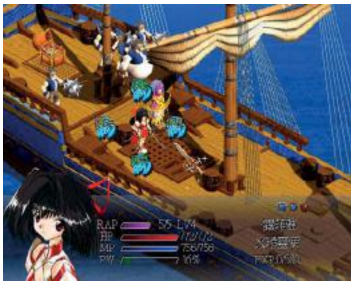
决战朝鲜 (1999)



A tactical RPG where you control Chinese soldiers in the Korean war, dealing with supply lines, limited ammo, permanent injuries and far better-equipped enemy forces.

Wind Fantasy: Magical Holy War

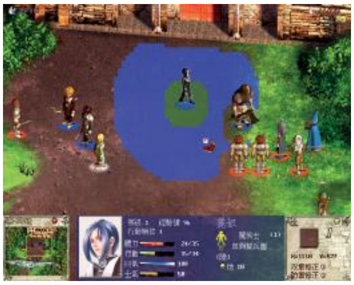
魔導聖戰～風色幻想～(1999)



The first entry in a long series of tactical RPGs, it combines a long, visual novel-like narrative with complex tactical battles using action points and got a 2004 remake.

Super Space-Time Heroes 3: Mad God Descent

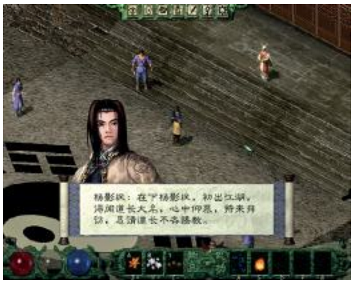
超時空英雄傳說III：狂神降世 (2001)



A beloved entry in this tactical RPG series, this replaces square grids with free movement in any direction, offers a lot of party-building options, and has a story with multiple routes.

Swordsman's Romance: Moonlight Destiny

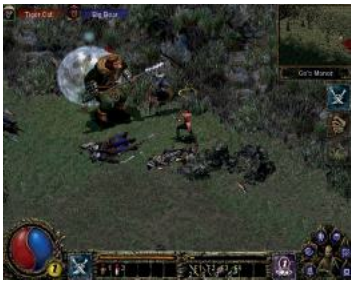
剑侠情缘外传：月影传说 (2001)



The third game in a series, it's a *Diablo*-like RPG about a wandering swordsmen, with multiple endings that range from romantic to tragic.

Blade & Sword

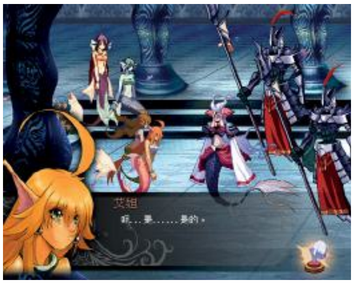
刀剑封魔录 (2002)



A *Diablo*-clone with martial arts elements. Along with *Prince of Qin*, it is one of few Chinese RPGs to be released in Europe and the US.

Heroine Anthem: The Elect of Wassernixe

聖女之歌～人魚的新娘 (2002)

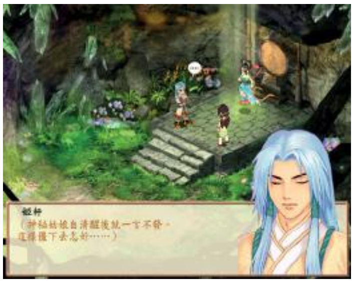


An unusual RPG about a girl who becomes a mermaid, combining freely swimming across the ocean with mini-games and turn-based battles.

To promote the release of *Heroine Anthem Zero* in 2016, the original game and its sequel became freely available for download

Fantasy Sango

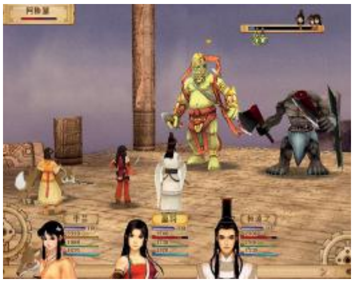
幻想三國誌 (2003)



An RPG set in a fantasy version of the Three Kingdoms era, with turn-based battles in a tactical grid, that became a very popular series across all of Asia, with several sequels.

Xuan-Yuan Sword: The Millennial Destiny

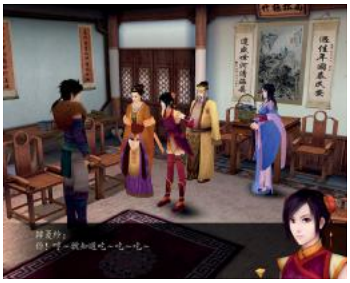
軒轅劍外傳：蒼之濤 (2004)



An ambitious classic, its complex story mixes Chinese history with time travel and questions about nationalism. With no romances or humour, it's a dense but deep RPG.

Chinese Paladin 4

仙剑奇侠传 4 (2007)



A huge critical and sales hit, it had a troubled development but managed to combine the emotional writing of the series with solid gameplay and very high production values.

THE ONLINE BOOM

As Internet and computer access expanded in the early 2000s, China's MMORPG market grew exponentially. *Fantasy Westward Journey* (梦幻西游) was released in 2001 and is one of the most profitable game series of all time, with $6.5 billion in lifetime revenue and over 400 million registered users.

Not only were online games extremely popular and profitable, they also solved a long-lasting issue: piracy.

China has the biggest internal PC market in the world, but most of its players pirate games. Developers tried many forms of copy-protection, from CD keys through hiding quest information in the manual to having players pick colours to match illustrations that came with the boxed copy. With the shift to 3D graphics, fully-voiced dialogues and orchestral soundtracks, development costs kept rising, so that higher and higher legitimate sales were required.

Online games partially solved that. Games were distributed for free; what was important were the fees paid to play through pre-paid game cards and, later, in-game purchases. All this led to a massive shift towards online games, later transitioning partially into browser and mobile games with similar monetisation systems.

The poster for *Chinese Paladin 3* (仙剑奇侠传三), which aired in 2009. It ran for 37 episodes and was one of the most popular TV shows of the year.

These became the backbone of most of the Asian game industry. It's a fascinating subject, but far beyond the scope of this book. For further reading on this, check out *Mobile Gaming in Asia: Politics, Culture and Emerging Technologies* by Dal Yong Jin, and *A Critical Cultural History of Online Games in China: 1995–2015*, by Matthew M. Chew.

It's important to remember that this shift was a global event, not something exclusive to China, to Asia or to RPGs. In Japan, companies like Square and Enix had to merge to handle ever-increasing development costs, while also relying more on handheld games. In the US, dozens of companies like Origin, Interplay, Sierra and Westwood Studios closed down or were purchased. Classic RPG series like *Ultima, Wizardry, Quest for Glory* and *Might & Magic* all came to an end, with surviving studios like BioWare and Bethesda moving focus from PCs to consoles.

It wasn't "the death of PC gaming", as many analysts warned, but it was undeniable that online and console games were more attractive markets. And the ever-increasing costs and risks of game development meant that companies went for the safest bet. With no access to the official console market, Chinese developers didn't have that option, relying only on online games.

During this era South Korea saw all its single-player RPGs disappear, but China actually managed to endure, with a few popular and critically acclaimed titles being released during this era, such as *Wind Fantasy 5* (2006) and *Chinese Paladin 4/5* (2007 and 2011). New series such as *Fantasy Sango* (2003) and *GuJian* (2010) also managed to gain popularity around this time.

While some series survived, thanks to the profits of their online counterparts, developers also found a new way to monetise these RPGs, by turning them into TV series, with several *Chinese Paladin, Xuan-Yuan Sword* and *GuJian* games adapted since 2005. It's a concept seen everywhere from the *Pokémon* TV show in the '90s to the recent *The Witcher* series on Netflix, banking on the game's popularity but also selling it to those coming fresh from the TV series.

Regardless, it's undeniable that Chinese RPGs were in decline, with veteran studios disbanding and the remaining games no longer on a par with international releases. Released in 2015, *Chinese Paladin 6* is a good example of these struggles: the game was praised for its plot, music and voice acting, but heavily criticised for feeling outdated, with very basic gameplay, poor graphics and several performance issues. A Chinese reviewer concluded, "Why not just make a TV series?"

GuJian
古剑奇谭：琴心剑魄今何在 (2010)

A new RPG by *Chinese Paladin 4* developers after Softstar Shanghai was dissolved, it's very similar to *CP4* in gameplay and presentation, but pushes them to the next level, being a very polished experience.

Chinese Paladin 6
仙劍奇俠傳六 (2015)

A game that is emblematic of the issues that Chinese RPGs faced in the 2010s: a great story, but was heavily criticised for its dated graphics and technical issues, being far behind international releases.

The Scroll of Taiwu
太吾绘卷 (2018)

A "cultivation" Roguelike and one of the first big Chinese indie hits on Steam, selling 1 million units in 2018, without any translations. Became an icon for the rise of a large Chinese audience on Steam.

GuJian 3
古剑奇谭三 (2018)

Tells the story of an immortal fairy king who journeys across the realms. One of the most ambitious Chinese games in recent years, it's a AAA RPG with combat similar to *The Witcher 3*. Review on page 560.

Genshin Impact
原神 (2020)

For this huge international hit, miHoYo studio used its mobile game expertise to bridge the mobile, console and PC markets with an extremely competent open-world action RPG. A landmark for the game industry.

Tale of Immortal
鬼谷八荒 (2021)

One of the most popular games on Steam in 2021, selling over 2 million units even before it had an English translation. An open-world "cultivation" Roguelike, building on the success of *The Scroll of Taiwu*.

GOING GLOBAL

This grim situation began to radically change by the late 2010s, with the rise of digital distribution, especially Steam – the country has over 1.3 billion habitants, and as of 2019 they account for 24% of all of Steam's users.

With Steam as a strong game distribution platform, there was an explosion of Chinese indies such as *ICEY* (2016), *Detention* (2017) and *My Time at Portia* (2018). *The Scroll of Taiwu* (2018) stood out, being a Roguelike based around the xianxia trope of "cultivation", whereby martial artists train to become immortals. Despite being only in Chinese, it quickly sold over a million copies.

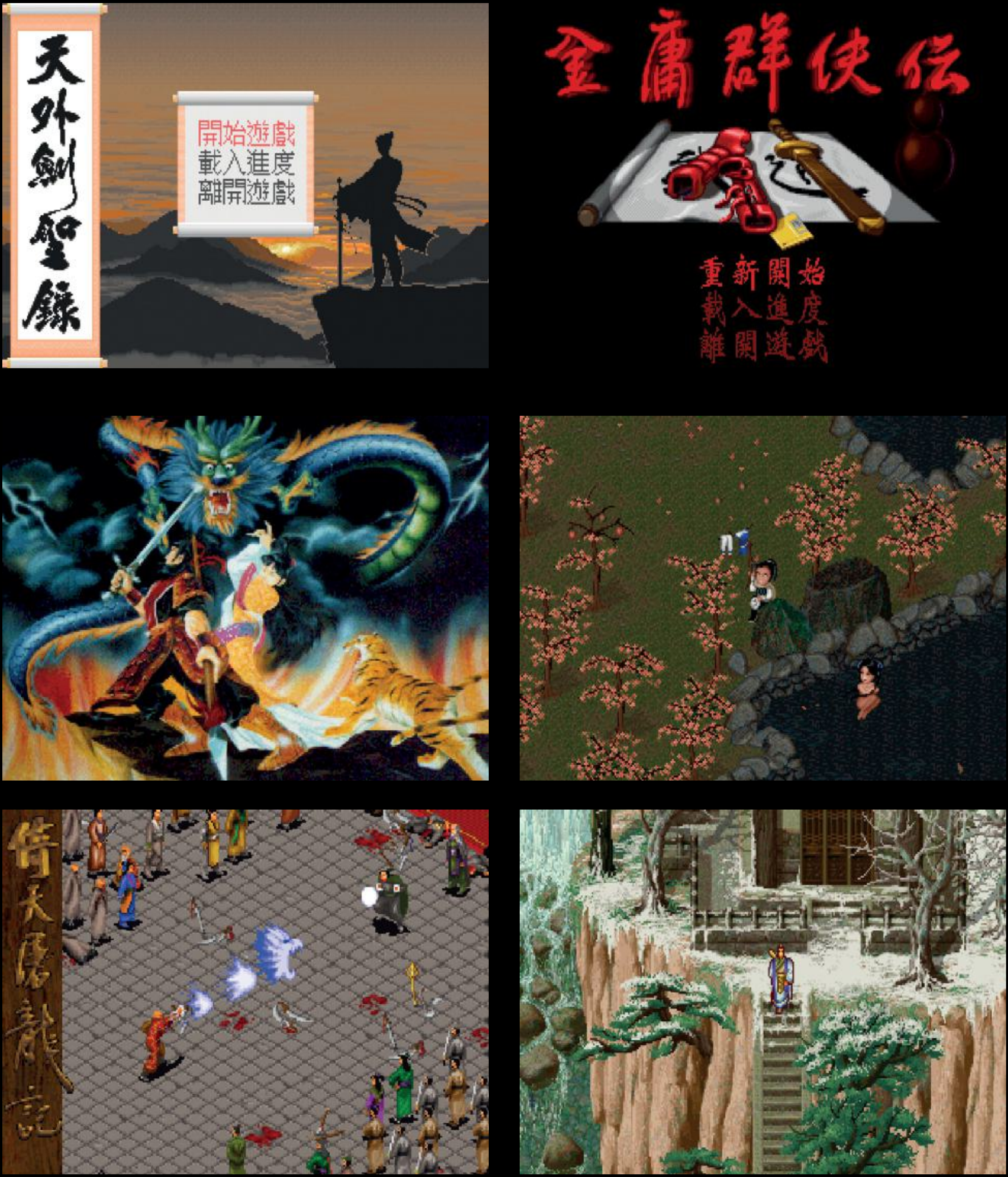
By 2018 we also saw *GuJian 3* arrive, an excellent AAA RPG easily comparable to western titles like *Vampyr* or *GreedFall*. However, even after selling over a million units and receiving an English translation, it remained ignored by the western media – as of 2021 there's not a single professional review of it on Metacritc.

The game to break all barriers would be 2020's *Genshin Impact*. The biggest international Chinese release ever, it successfully went from "Chinese *Breath of the Wild* clone", as the international press initially reported it, to a global phenomenon that made more than a billion dollars in less than six months.

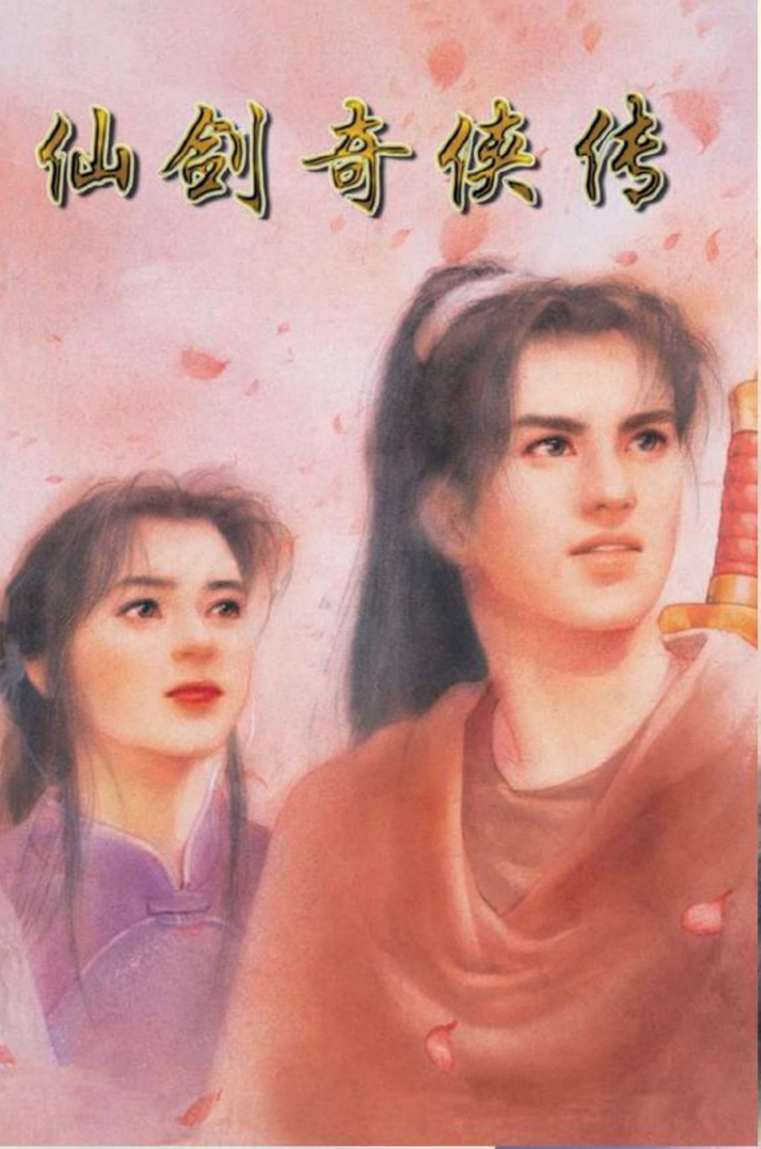
That's not a simple feat, requiring a great game, a global marketing strategy and a large investment in localisation. Even recent big Chinese games like *GuJian 3* and *Xuan-Yuan Sword VII* (2020) only had Chinese audio, but *Genshin* offers English, Japanese, Korean and Chinese voices, plus 13 languages for UI and subtitles.

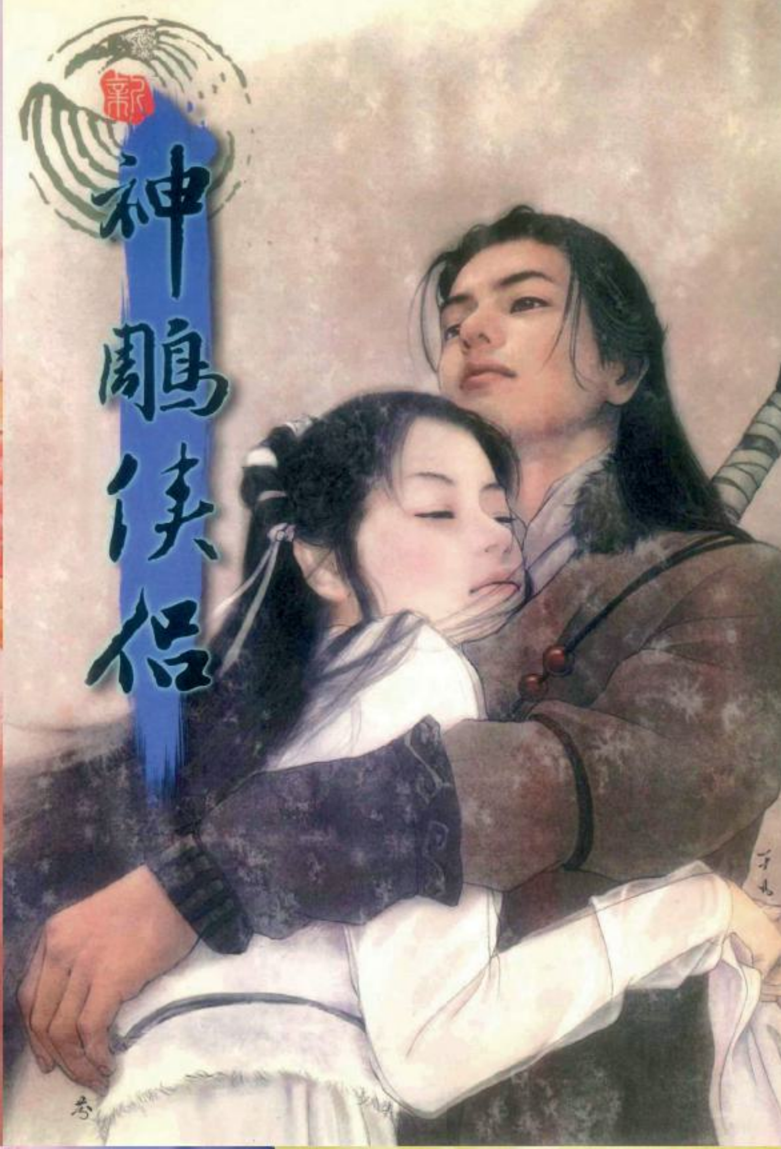
With more and more indies like *Tale of Immortal*, *Amazing Cultivation Simulator* and *Sands of Salzaar* being successful on Steam and promising English translations, it seems inevitable that Chinese RPGs will play a much bigger role in the upcoming years.

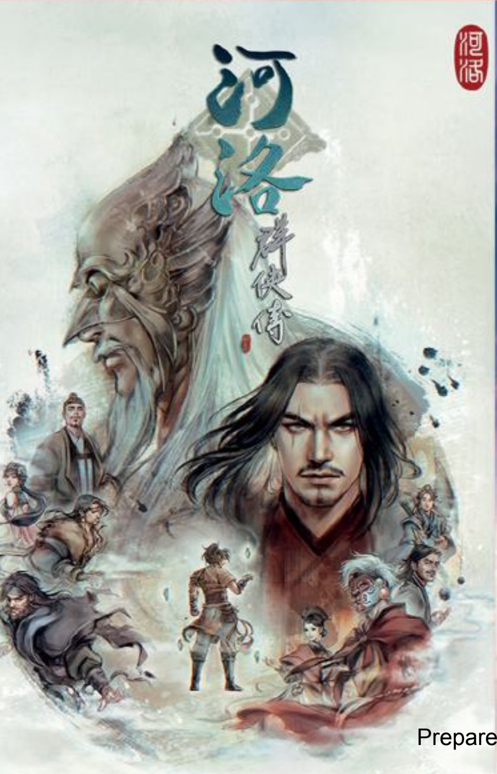
Sadly, there are no English books about the Chinese game industry, but you can read more about it in *Video Games Around the World* (2015) and the 2021 article "The Development of Greater China's Games Industry: From Copying to Imitation to Innovation"

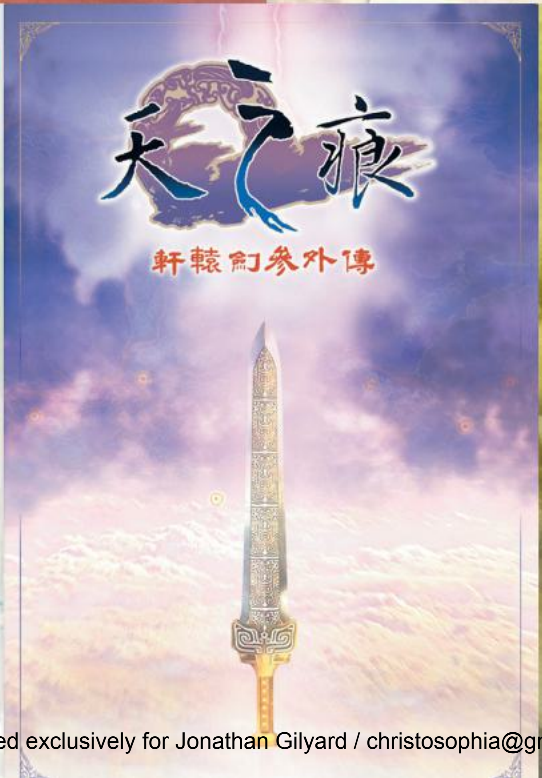

天外劍聖錄
開始遊戲
載入進度
離開遊戲
金庸群俠傳
重新開始
載入進度
離開遊戲
倚天屠龍記

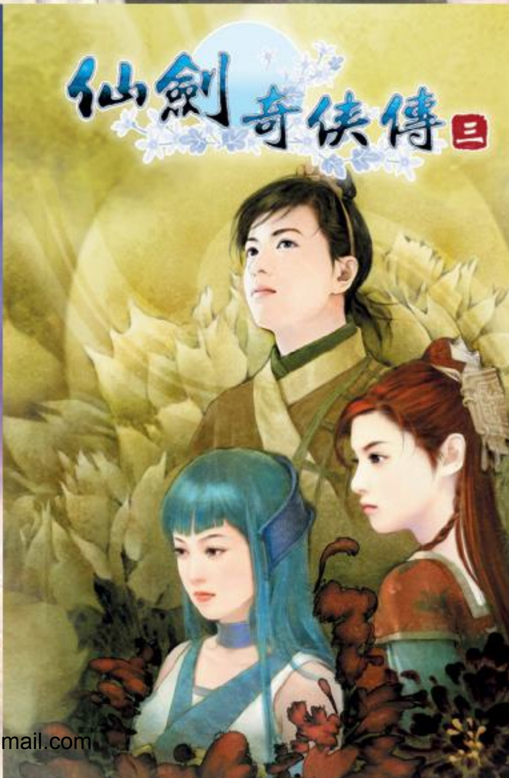
A selection of iconic Chinese RPGs: screenshots of *Legend of the Chivalrous Hero*, *Heroes of Jin Yong*, *Eight Swords of Shenzhou*, *Chinese Paladin*, *Heavenly Sword and Dragon Slaying Sabre* and *Legend of the Chivalrous Hero 3*; box art from *Chinese Paladin*, *The New Return of the Condor Heroes*, *Chinese Paladin 3*, *Xuan-Yuan Sword: Scar of Sky* and *Ho Tu Lo Shu*.


仙剑奇侠传


新
神鵰侠侣


河洛
河洛群侠傳


天之痕
軒轅劍參外傳


仙劍奇侠傳三

Korean RPGs: The short-lived 'package' market

Early home computers began to appear in South Korea in the early '80s. These were supported by local companies like Samsung, who organised student contests to promote this new technology.

By the mid-'80s the several competing standards of early computers would be replaced by Apple II- and MSX-compatible machines. This made it easier to import games from abroad – mainly Apple II games from the US and MSX games from Japan. These MSX machines came in two varieties: either as computers with a cartridge slot, or as consoles with just controllers and the cartridge slot, such as the Zemmix console.

Like in Taiwan, Poland, Russia and many other countries at the time, there were no copyright laws for foreign software, so Korean companies would simply pirate and re-release foreign games as their own.

Unique to Korean gamers was the country's ban on culture from Japan. After the brutal Japanese occupation of Korea ended in 1945, the country decreed a "Law For Punishing Anti-National Deeds", banning consumption of Japanese media such as music, TV shows and, of course, games.

S-BOY
12
6
17
TIME
198
SCORE
0178516
?

Super Boy 3, a bootleg Mario game by Zemina for the MSX, combining elements of *Super Mario Bros 3* and *Super Mario World*

This didn't mean it was impossible to get Japanese games – Korean companies simply hacked games to remove any Japanese text or logo. The popular games at the time were mostly arcade-like titles, so translation required little effort, at most a few lines of text in the title screen. There were no bootleg translations of complex games, like the Taiwanese *Dragon Quest.*

However, by July 1987 the country had adopted software copyright laws, forcing local game companies to start developing their own games. This is when, reportedly, the first fully Korean RPG appears: 1987's *Dream Traveller Part 1* (or *Legend of the Holy Sword*/神劍 의전설), created by high-school student Nam Inhwan (남인환) for the Apple II.

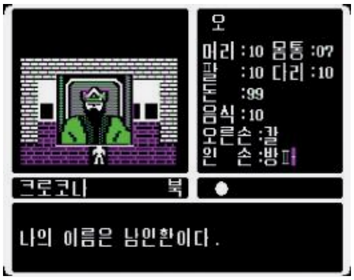
While an important first step, it would take a while for more original RPGs to appear. Korean companies could no longer re-publish foreign games, but the law was loose enough to allow them to re-create these games from scratch.

Zemina was a company specialising in these clones, producing bootleg versions of *Super Mario Bros, Tetris, Knightmare* and *Street Fighter* for the MSX, as well as the Family Cart, an MSX accessory that allowed the computer to play Famicom games.

One of the few companies focused on fully original games was Topia, Korea's largest chain of computer stores. They would hire developers to create original titles to be sold in their stores, such as 1989's *Romantic Paladin* (風流俠客/풍류협객), a monochrome action RPG in the style of *Hydlide.*

As a whole, Korean PC games were seen as too simple and outdated, unable to match the know-how and technology of developers from US and Japan, who had years of experience and easy access to powerful computers like the Amiga and the Japanese PC-9800.

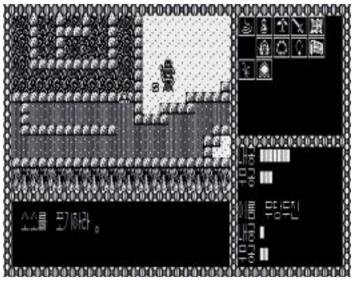
Dream Traveller - Part 1
神劍 의전설 (1987)



나의 이름은 남인환이다.

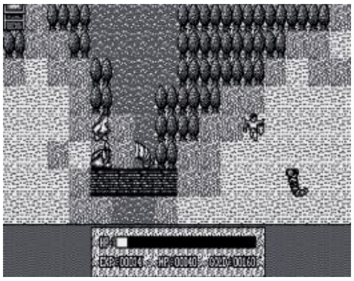
Created by high school student Nam Inhwan (남인환), it's an *Ultima* clone for the Apple II. Nonetheless, for the first time, Koreans had a complex RPG in their own language.

Romantic Paladin
風流俠客 / 풍류협객 (1989)



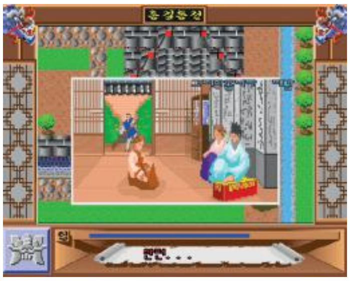
An action RPG inspired by *Hydlide*. Reportedly Korea's first RPG for IBM PCs, it's monochrome and primitive even when compared to the original *Hydlide,* released in 1984.

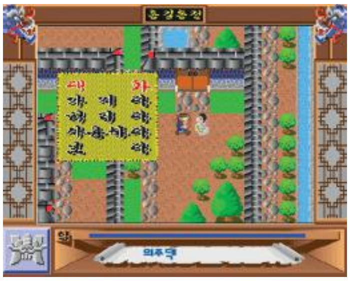
Zinnia
지니아 (1992)

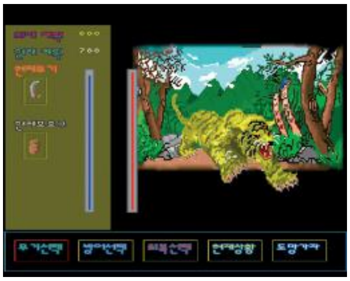


A freeware action RPG inspired by *Ys*. You fight monsters in real-time to get stronger, then face turn-based boss battles. Got a sequel in 1993, *Burning Soul* (불타는 영혼).

Hong Gildong - 홍길동전 (1993)







A colourful RPG heavily inspired by *Dragon Quest*, but with a much larger focus on narrative, telling the story of the titular character, the legendary Hong Gildong. While it was still somewhat primitive, it was a giant leap in quality over previous Korean RPGs, and told a story dear to Koreans, fully accessible to those who did not speak other languages. The game had a 1995 sequel (홍길동전2) that mixed *Dragon's Lair*-like interactive animated scenes with simple fighting-game duels against other martial artists, but this wasn't as well received.

THE VGA ERA

The early '90s saw an end to the dispute between multiple home computer standards, with IBM PC-compatibles becoming the global standard, thanks in part to the new VGA cards that allowed for better graphics. Much more accessible than machines like the Amiga, they allowed for developers across the globe to produce far more advanced games.

This is when *Hong Gildong* (홍길동전, 1993) was released. The game is based on *The Story of Hong Gildong*, a popular Korean novel from the 16th century about the son of a nobleman from the Joseon kingdom era. Despite being a gifted child with magical powers, Gildong is discriminated against for being illegitimate. So he ventures into the world, becoming the leader of a group of bandits and then forming his own kingdom.

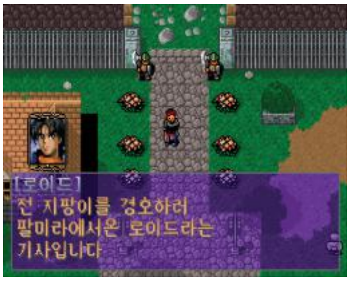
The Story of Hong Gildong is a very influential novel in Korea, also inspiring several movies, TV shows and Korean comics (known as "manhwa"). We'll see other RPGs based on it, and if you're interested in reading it, it was re-translated into English by Penguin Classics in 2016, and it's just about 70 pages long.

While the game *Hong Gildong* was still a bit primitive compared to JRPGs or western CRPGs, it was still a landmark for the local market, showing that it was possible for Koreans to have their own games, in their own language, about their own culture.

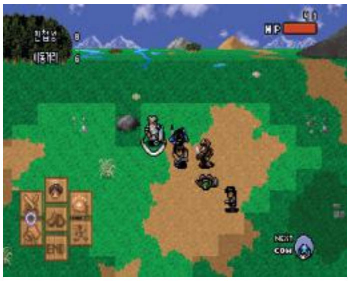
Over the next few years, several high-profile Korean RPGs would follow, part of Korea's short-lived 'package' market – so called due to being sold in physical packages, unlike later online-only games.

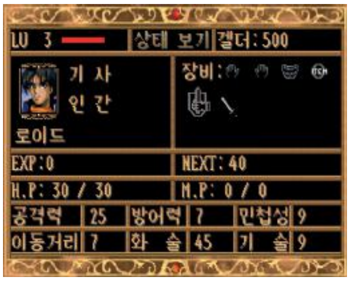
Astonishia Story - 어스토니시아스토리 (1994)

A sequel, *Astonishia Story 2*, was released for Korean GXG phones in 2005, then remade for PSP in 2008. It was released in the West as *Crimson Gem Saga*.



[로이드]
전 지팡이를 경호하러
팔미라에서온 로이드라는
기사입니다

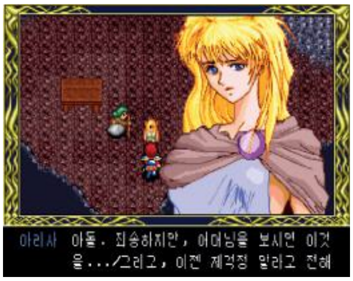




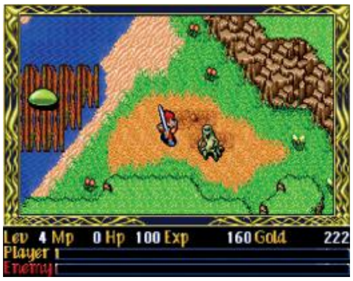
LU 3 | 상태 보기 | 겔더:500
기 사
인 간
로이드
장비:
EXP:0 NEXT: 40
H.P: 30 / 30 M.P: 0 / 0
공격력 25 방어력 7 민첩성 9
이동거리 7 화 술 45 기 술 9

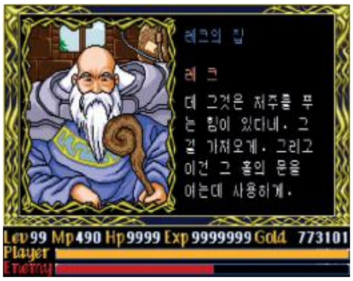
The debut of studio Sonnori, this was a very popular title that impressed Korean gamers and sold over 50,000 copies. While at its core the game is a very traditional JRPG, its combat is tactical, closer to that of western RPGs like *Pool of Radiance* and *Ultima III–VI* than to Japanese titles, something that would be a trend among Korean RPGs. Still fondly remembered, *Astonishia Story* got a remake in 2002 (called *Astonishia Story R*) and a PSP port in 2005, as well as a sequel in 2008 – all available in English.

Ys II Special - 이스 II 스페셜 (1995)



아리사 아돌. 죄송하지만, 어머님을 보시면 이것
을.../그리고, 이젠 제걱정 말라고 전해

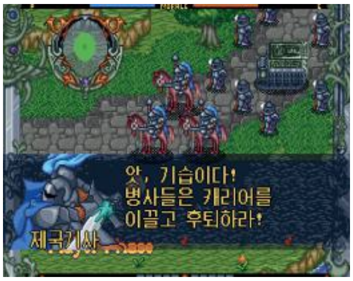




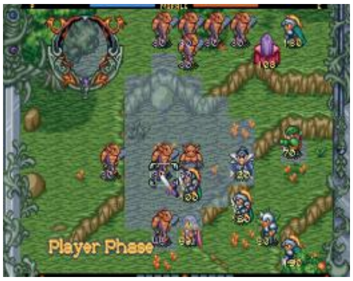
레크의 집
레 크
더 그것은 저주를 푸
는 힘이 있다네. 그
걸 가져오게. 그리고
이건 그 홀의 문을
여는데 사용하게.

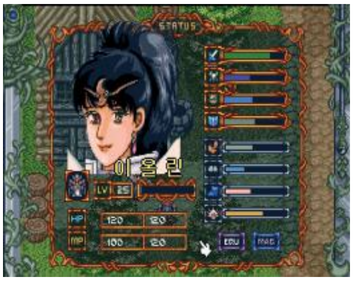
In 1992, Studio Mantra translated *Princess Maker* for the Korean market, porting it to MS-DOS. Soon after, they managed to license *Ys II*, a popular 1988 action RPG by Japanese developer Falcom. Instead of just porting and translating it, this time they redid most of the game, adding plot elements from the *Ys* anime, new areas, quests and songs, and even hiring manhwa artist Lee Myungjin (이명진) to do the art. While some of the changes bothered die-hard fans, such as the addition of an attack button, *Ys II Special* proved the skill of Korean developers.

The War of Genesis - 창세기전 (1995)



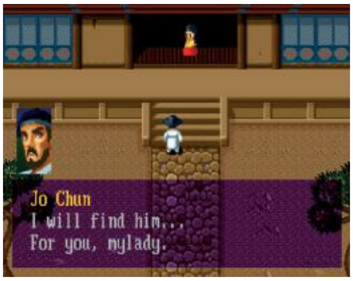
제국기사
앗, 기습이다!
병사들은 캐리어를
이끌고 후퇴하라!

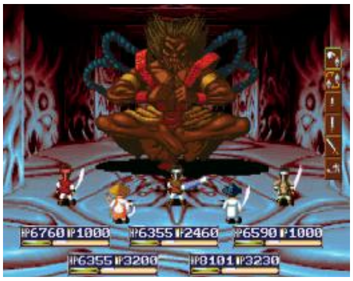


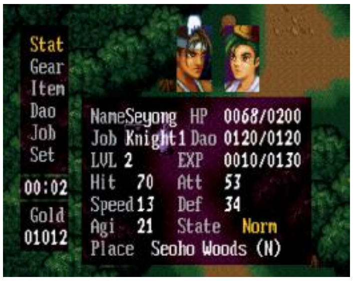


Created by Softmax, this is a tactical RPG about a kingdom trying to resist invasion by a powerful empire. While you can explore some towns, JRPG-style, you'll spend most of the time in large-scale tactical battles. Unlike other similar games, here each character can perform various actions per turn, drawing from a pool of action points. The excellent pixel art and the artwork by manhwa artist Kim Jin (김진) earned much praise, but the game suffered from bugs, balance issues and an incomplete story, as it had to be rushed out due to financial issues.

Romance of the Forgotten Kingdom - 망국 전기: 잊혀진 나라 의 이야기 (1995)


Jo Chun
I will find him...
For you, mylady.

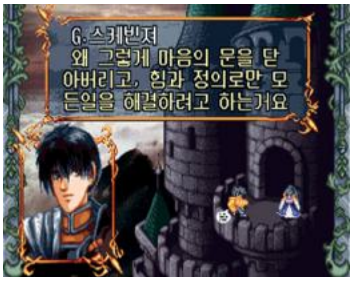


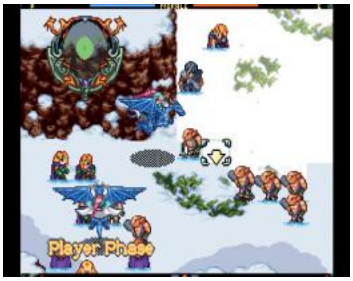


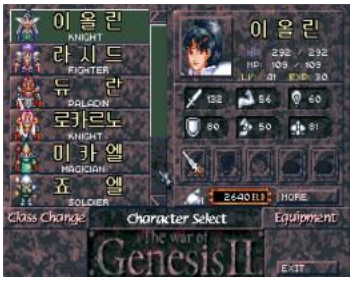
00:02
Gold 01012
Name Seyong HP 0068/0200
Job Knight1 Dao 0120/0120
LVL 2 EXP 0010/0130
Hit 70 Att 53
Speed 13 Def 34
Agi 21 State Norm
Place Seoho Woods (N)

Another game inspired by *The Story of Hong Gildong*, although this time it's not a direct adaptation of the novel, but rather a continuation of it, set in the kingdom founded by Hong Gildong and offering multiple endings depending on your actions. The story was written by a high school student, who created a 300-page handwritten manuscript and won a 1993 public contest organised by the government to promote Korean culture in the national videogame industry. It received a fan translation by Sam Derboo, and it's a good entry point into Korean RPGs.

The War of Genesis II - 창세기전 II (1996)


G.스케빈져
왜 그렇게 마음의 문을 닫아버리고, 힘과 정의로만 모든일을 해결하려고 하는거요



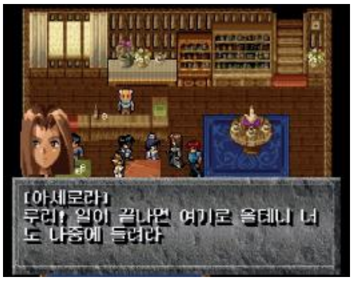

이 올 린 KNIGHT
라 시 드 FIGHTER
듀 란 PALADIN
로카르노 KNIGHT
미 카 엘 MAGICIAN
죠 엘 SOLDIER

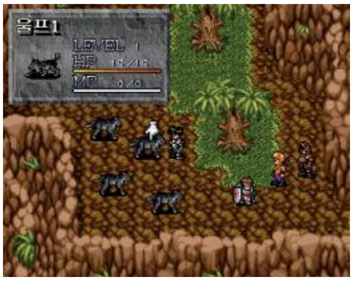
이 올 린
HP 292 / 292
MP 109 / 109
LV 01 EXP 30
132 56 60
80 50 81
2640 ELT

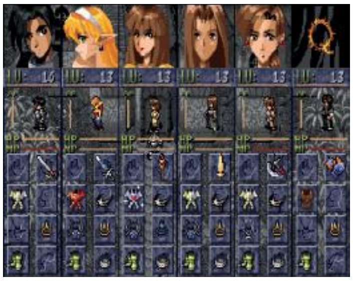
War of Genesis II is currently being remade for Nintendo Switch by LINE Games, with a promised 2023 release date

While the first game got a good reception, it was the sequel that left a mark. *The War of Genesis II* is actually a full remake of the first game – retelling the original story alongside a new, separate storyline, until both converge in an epic plot full of twists and with a tear-jerking ending. Thanks to the experience and money Softmax earned from the first game, *The War of Genesis II* is highly polished. The combat mechanics were greatly improved, sea and air battles were added and the shift from floppy disks to CD allowed for a superb soundtrack.

Forgotten Saga - 포가튼사가 (1997)

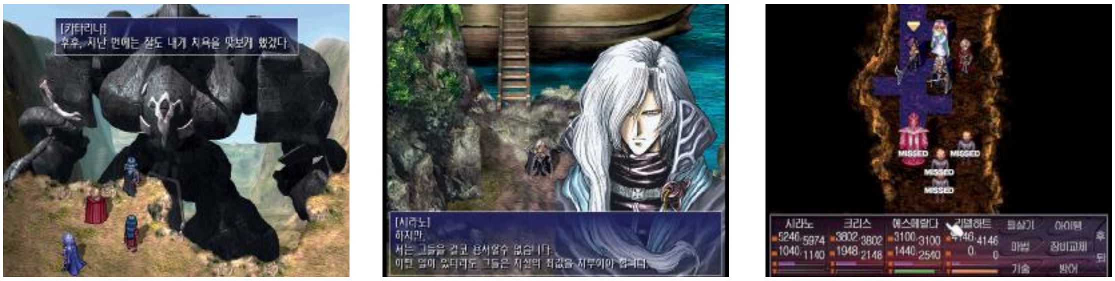

[아세로라]
우린 일이 끝나면 여기로 올테니 너도 나중에 들려라


울프1
LEVEL 1
HP 15/16
MP 0/0



Sonnori's second RPG once again looks like a typical JRPG but follows the design principles of western RPGs. You start by creating a party of four characters, rolling their races, classes and stats. Combat is in turn-based tactical form again, but now the game also offers a massive open world, allowing you to travel freely across the land, get quests from NPCs and even recruit some of them to your party, depending on your actions, leading to multiple endings. Despite several delays and an initially buggy release, it became a beloved classic.

The War of Genesis: Rhapsody of Zephyr - 창세기전 외전: 西風の狂詩曲 (1998)

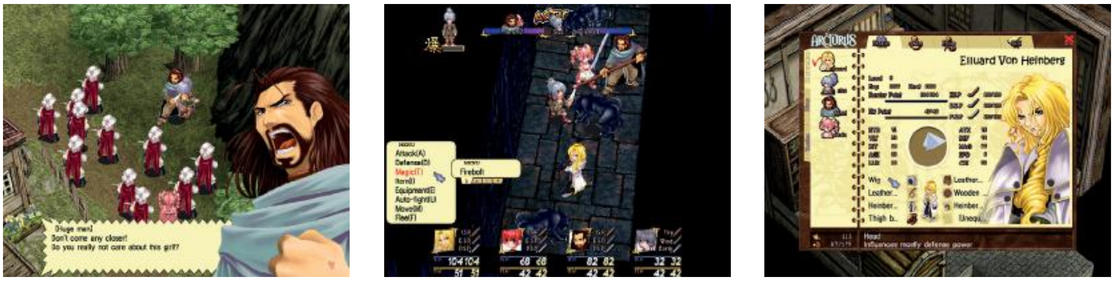


[카타리나]
후후, 지난 번에는 잘도 내게 치욕을 맛보게 했겠다

The Japanese releases of *Rhapsody of Zephir* changed the grim character portraits to be more fitting for Japanese players

Heavily inspired by *The Count of Monte Cristo*, this game tells the story of Cyrano, a man unjustly imprisoned who, many years later, escapes, acquires great power (a demonic sword, in this case) and plots his revenge. The more personal tone of the story scaled down the series' army battles into fights for a small group of characters, adding mechanics like weapon durability and gun ammunition, plus four different endings. It was a huge hit in Korea, selling over 100,000 copies, also released in China and Japan with ports for Dreamcast in 2001 and PS2 in 2004.

Arcturus: The Curse and Loss of Divinity - 악튜러스 (1999)



[Huge man]
Don't come any closer!
So you really not care about this girl?

Arcturus had an English demo shown at E3 2001; the game was never officially translated, but has an English fan-translation

An ambitious RPG created by Sonnori and Gravity (former *Ys II Special* devs), this offers a complex story and charismatic cast of characters, with an open-world structure. While it sold well, moving over 60,000 copies, *Arcturus* was plagued by issues, from several bugs to a plagiarism scandal that led to the company having to recall pre-orders and delay the game. The game's engine was later used by Gravity to create *Ragnarök Online* (2002).

THE IMF CRISIS

While the Korean game industry wasn't as massive as the Chinese, it was still one of the biggest in the world: over 80 single-player RPGs were developed in the '90s and early 2000s, not to mention its large RTS scene. Several RPGs were based on Korea's booming manhwa scene or on local TV shows, such as *Flying Superboard* (스터손) and *Taoist Mutul* (머털도사).

As in other parts of the globe, this golden age of single-player PC games would collapse by the early 2000s, driven by factors such as the massive popularity of the Playstation 2 and online games, the rising cost of game development due to 3D graphics, piracy, etc.

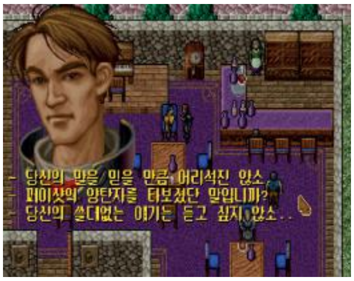
Korean developers had to face an additional issue: the 1997 IMF crisis. Also known as the Asian Financial Crisis, it was a huge investment bubble that hit South Korea hard – the country went from an economic boom to a recession, going from 9.6% annual GDP growth in 1995 to a -5.1% contraction in 1998.

This led to countless companies going bankrupt, including giants like Daewoo. Even successful companies like Softmax suffered heavily. In 1998 they released *The War of Genesis: The Rhapsody of Zephyr* – one of Korea's most celebrated RPGs, which managed to compete with *StarCraft* on the sales charts. However, the publisher, HiCom, went bankrupt during the IMF crisis, and Softmax reportedly never received any of *Zephyr*'s sales.

HiCom itself was in charge of another popular Korean RPG – *Corum: Legend of Anpnentria* (코룸: 저주 받은 땅, 1997), an action RPG following a formula similar to that of *Ys II Special*. HiCom was saved by an investor and managed to continue the series, releasing two sequels, in 1998 and 1999, and *Corum Another Story* (코룸외전:이계의 강림자들, 1999), a turn-based spin-off. While it survived the IMF crisis, they would all be swallowed by the upcoming MMORPG boom.

Liar: Legend of Sword II

LIAR: 신검 의 전설 II (1995)

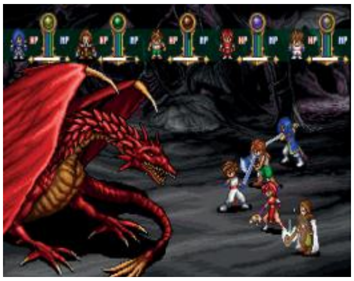


- 당신의 말을 믿을 만큼 어리석진 않소
- 페이샷의 양탄자를 터보셨단 말입니까?
- 당신의 쓸데없는 얘기는 듣고 싶지 않소..

The sequel to *Dream Traveller Pt 1*, once again taking a lot of inspiration from Garriot's RPGs; it's a simple but well-presented *Ultima VII* clone.

Protocoss: Prophecy of the Gods

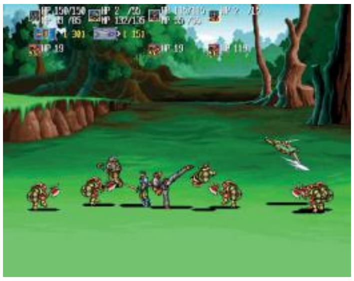
프로토코스 – 신들의 예언서 (1996)



Heavily inspired by *Final Fantasy*, *Protocoss* stood out for its impressive graphics and overall high quality. Its sequel is a side-scrolling action RPG.

The Story of Atria Land

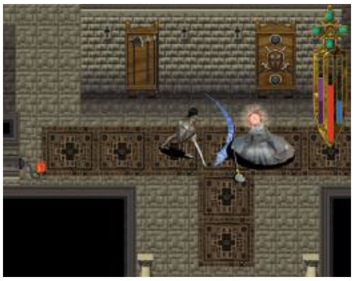
아트리아 대륙전기 (1997)



On the surface, a typical JRPG, but combat is fought as a beat-'em-up, with your party in a small arena. The 1998 sequel added two player co-op.

Corum: Legend of Anpnentria

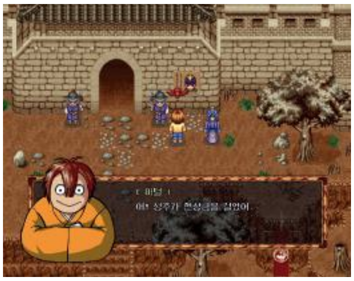
코룸: 저주 받은 땅 (1997)



One of several Korean action RPGs following a formula like that of *Ys II Special*. While simple, it was popular and got two sequels, a turn-based spin-off and later an MMORPG.

Taoist Mutul and the 108 Spectres

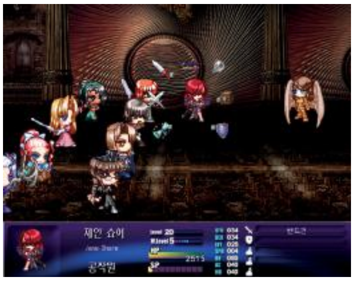
머털도사 1 백팔요괴편 (1998)



One of several RPGs based on local TV shows that are unknown outside Korea. Tells the story of a boy who is apprentice to a Taoist master and casts spells using his hair.

The War of Genesis: Tempest

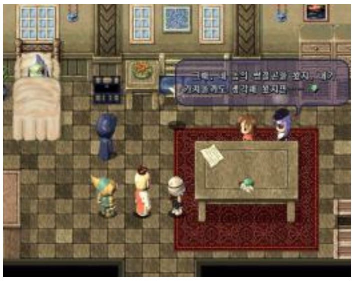
창세기외전2 템페스트 (1998)



Originally made as a raising sim similar to *Princess Maker*, economic issues led to it being converted into a *War of Genesis* title, mixing visual novel elements with tactical battles.

Flying Superboard: Fantasy Journey to the West

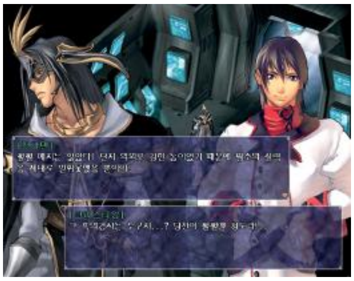
날아라 슈퍼보드 –幻想西遊記– (1998)



An RPG based on a popular Korean TV animation called *Flying Superboard* (스터손), itself a lighthearted adaptation of the famous novel *Journey to the West*.

The War of Genesis III - Part 1 & 2

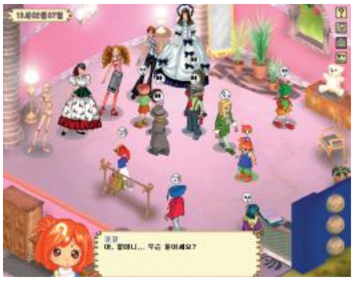
창세기전 3 (1999-2000)



The epic end of the *War of Genesis* series, it was split into two parts – one released in 1999, the other in 2000. In total, it spans 8 CDs, mixing large tactical battles with a lengthy story.

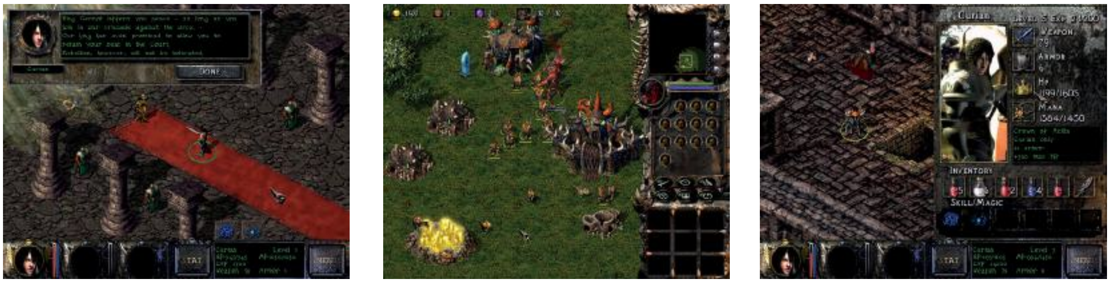
Koko Look

코코룩 (2002)



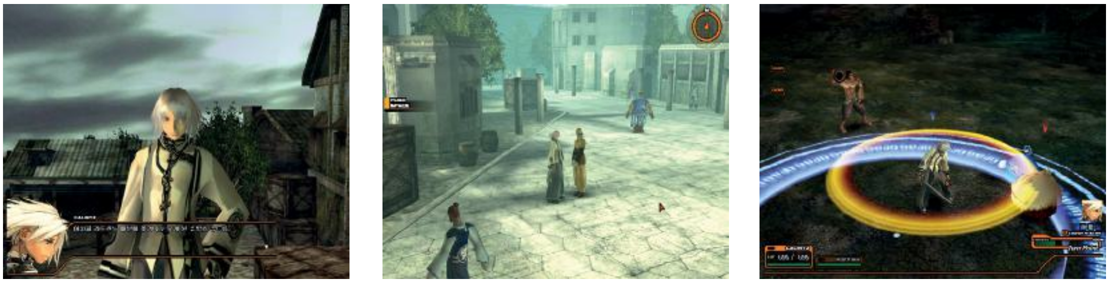
An RPG for young girls, this tells the story of a girl who wants to be a fashion designer. Combines JRPG battles with managing your own atelier, and offers multiple endings.

Kingdom Under Fire: A War of Heroes - 킹덤 언더 파이어 (2000)



One of the most famous Korean 'package' games, it combines RTS levels like those of *WarCraft II* with dungeon-crawling RPG levels similar to *Diablo*'s. Set in a Tolkien-esque fantasy world, it offers two factions – light and dark – with separate campaigns. A huge hit in Korea, it sold over 500,000 copies, was released worldwide and got several sequels.

Magna Carta: The Phantom of Avalanche - 마그나카르타 (2001)



Promoted as an epic 3D RPG, *Magna Carta* had a very short development cycle, leading to a confusing story and battle system, made worse by a release tainted by game-breaking bugs. Initial reactions were extremely negative, earning it the nickname "Bugna Carta" and culminating in an apology letter from the game's director. Sales recovered after a first wave of patches, but it was Softmax's last 'package' RPG, becoming an icon for the downfall of the Korean RPG.

THE END OF THE 'PACKAGE' INDUSTRY

After the IMF crisis, the surviving RPG developers faced a dire scenario. Korea was taken by piracy, game magazines with cheap 'full game' CDs and 'PC bangs', Internet cafés where millions of Koreans gathered to play *StarCraft* (1998) and MMOs like *Lineage* (리니지, 1998). It's important to understand how big *Lineage* really was: from 1998 to 2004, it had more monthly users than all the western MMOs combined.

While series like *Corum* would also shift into MMOs, some of Korea's studios tried to stay competitive by releasing very ambitious 'package' RPGs.

Arcturus: The Curse and Loss of Divinity (악튜러스, 2000) came from the combined effort of two studios, Sonnori (creators of *Astonishia Story* and *Forgotten Saga*) and Gravity (formed by former *Ys II Special* devs). The game sold well, but was entirely overshadowed by its follow-up: Gravity reused the game's engine to create *Ragnarök Online* (라그나로크 온라인, 2002), one of the most popular MMORPGs of the 2000s.

The other big release would be *Magna Carta: The Phantom of Avalanche* (마그나카르타, 2001). Having just finished their flagship series with the two-part epic *War of Genesis III* (창세기전 3, 1999), Softmax's next title had the company entering the 3D world, aspiring to rival foreign titles like *Final Fantasy X* (2001).

However, Softmax was used to making a game per year, and *Magna Carta* suffered from this rushed development. Not only were the story and battle system confusing, but the game was extremely buggy – so much so that they had to recall thousands of installation CDs due to a game-breaking bug. The game later got patched and still had decent sales, but had already shattered players' faith in Korean RPGs, becoming an icon for the downfall of the 'packages' market.

In contrast to the Chinese RPG market, where a few big names like *Chinese Paladin* and *Xuan-Yuan Sword* had new single-player releases even in the late 2000s and 2010s, in Korea the single-player PC market was fully replaced by online and mobile games.

MOVING TO OTHER MARKETS

While Softmax had a very rocky start with its *Magna Carta* series, the game sold well enough to become their new main product. For the sequel, they broke new ground and secured a deal to develop games for Sony's Playstation 2 (a first among Korean developers), with *Magna Carta: Tears of Blood* (2004), later re-released for the PSP as *Magna Carta Portable* (2006).

A worldwide release, it was a hit in Japan, but received lukewarm reviews in the west and sold poorly in its home country, as the Korean PC market was long gone and the game was a console exclusive. The series would end with *Magna Carta II* (2009), now an Xbox 360 exclusive. Once again, it was well-received in Japan, mostly ignored in Korea and considered a mediocre JRPG in the rest of the world.

While *Magna Carta* failed to impress western audiences, another Korean RPG series has succeeded: Kingdom Under Fire. The series began on PCs in 2000 with *Kingdom Under Fire: A War of Heroes*, an unusual combination of RTS-style and *Diablo*-like levels. The game got a worldwide release in 2001, becoming their first Korean game for many western gamers.

As for *Magna Carta*, the sequels moved to consoles, with *Kingdom Under Fire: The Crusaders* (2004) and *Kingdom Under Fire: Heroes* (2005) offering a blend of RTS and *Dynasty Warriors*-like battles for the original Xbox, then *Kingdom Under Fire: Circle of Doom* (2007) becoming a beat-'em-up/action RPG for the Xbox 360.

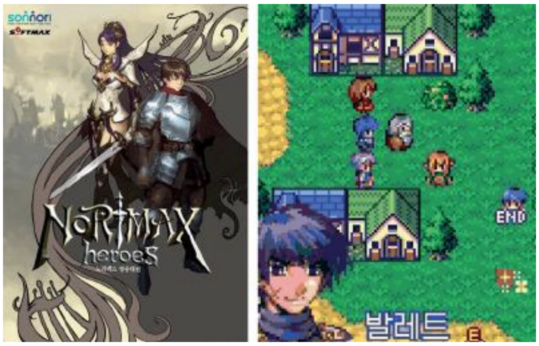
While not the only Korean RPGs on consoles, Kingdom Under Fire remains the most popular series abroad and arguably the only one to successfully make the jump from PCs to consoles.

MOBILE NOSTALGIA

Korea is the country of LG and Samsung, so it had a strong mobile industry. In the early 2000s, service providers would offer exclusive games as an incentive for you to choose their services, leading to competition between companies to offer the best games and the rise of mobile developers like Gamevil and Com2uS.

While early 2000s mobile games look very simple today, Korea saw some massive hits during this era, such as Gamevil's Nom (놈) series, an endless runner that sold over 1 million copies in 2003, making it one of the world's best-selling games at the time.

RPGs also played a big part in this, as tactical RPGs worked well with the limited hardware and controls. This led to new titles such as *The War of Genesis CROW* (2003) and *CROW 2* (2005), as well as ports of classic hits, such as a three-episode port of *Astonishia Story* and a four-episode port of *War of Genesis III - Part 1*.



Norimax Heroes (2005) was one of Korea's high-profile early mobile games; it's a tactical RPG made by Sonnori and Softmax, featuring iconic characters from their games

All this nostalgia for 'package' RPG series would soon be eclipsed by new mobile IPs such as EA's Heroes Lore (영웅서기), a series of six action RPGs from 2005 to 2014, and Gamevil's Zenonia (제노니아), which began in 2008 and is still going strong, with seven games released and *World of Zenonia* announced for 2022.

In 2009, with the arrival of the iPhone and App Store, we see the start of the modern mobile industry, with the shift to free-to-play games with micro-transactions, the arrival of platforms like Kakaotalk & LINE, and the rise of massive hits like *Summoners War, Dragon Blaze, Lineage M, CrossFire*, etc. If you're interested in this topic, check Dal Yong Jin's book *Mobile Gaming in Asia: Politics, Culture and Emerging Technologies*.

THE LEGACY OF KOREAN RPGS

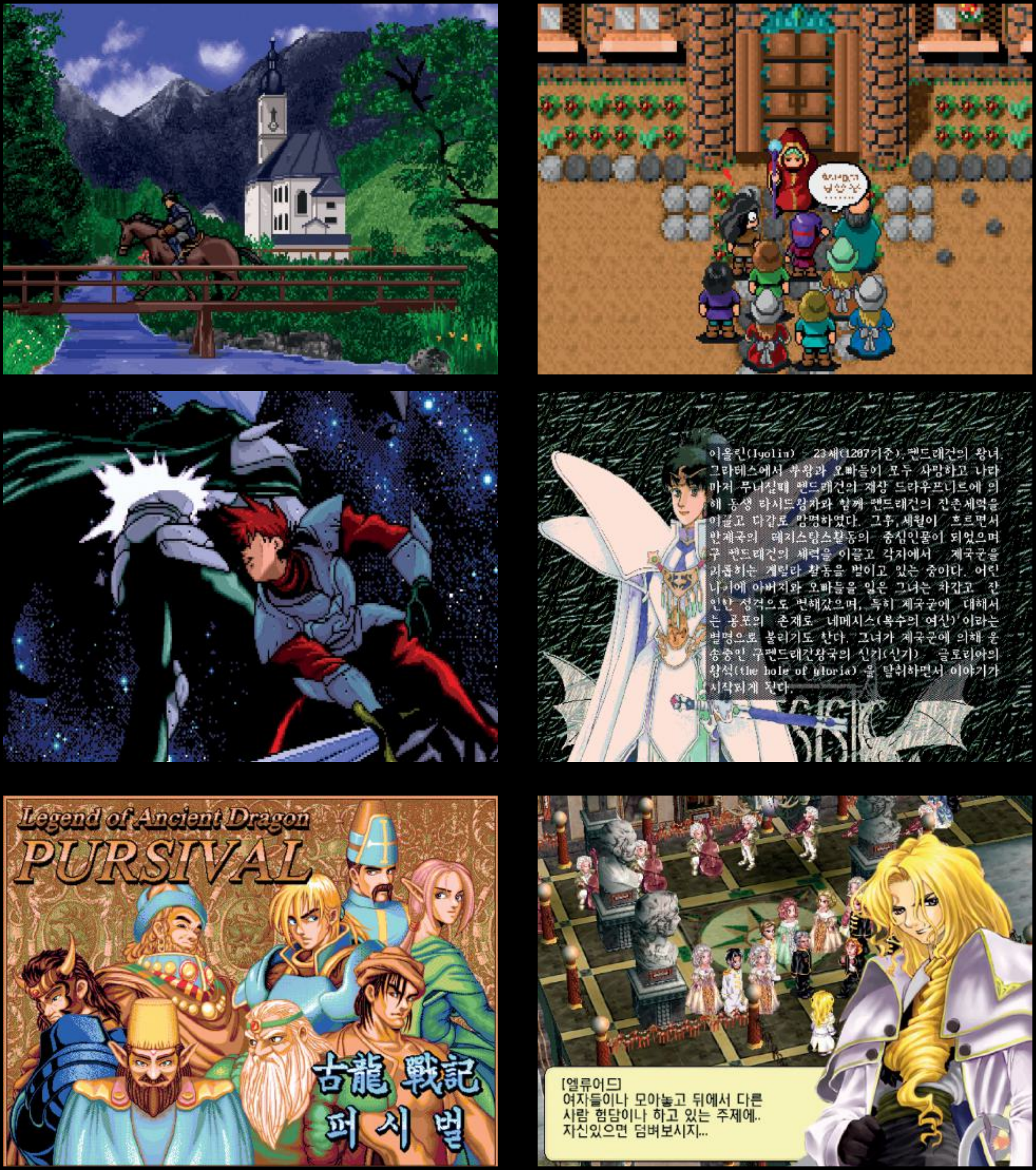
In the end, while it's undeniable that South Korea played a vital role in shaping the MMORPG, mobile and e-Sports markets, the legacy of their 'package' single-player RPGs isn't as clear.

Some differentiated themselves by telling local stories like *Hong Gildong*, but they never developed their own unique style. And the often buggy releases gave them a bad reputation when compared to foreign games. Moreover, most of the teams and series from the golden age of single-player RPGs have long vanished. Softmax tried a revival in 2016 with *War of Genesis 4*, but it was an ill-fated MMO that stayed online for only a year – the entire company was sold soon after.

Meanwhile, while Chinese indie developers found a new market with Steam, Korean ones are still rare. Only very recently have we seen a few successful releases, such as *The Coma: Cutting Class* (2015), *Lobotomy Corporation* (2018), *Vambrace: Cold Soul* (2019), *Troubleshooter: Abandoned Children* (2020), *Library of Ruina* (2021) and *Chrono Ark* (2021).

This nascent indie scene, combined with the upcoming 2022 remake of *War of Genesis II* for Nintendo Switch (titled *The War of Genesis: Remnants of Gray*) might help us better understand the past and future of Korean RPGs.

You can read more about Korean games and developers at Hardcore Gaming 101's excellent feature on Korean Gaming, as well as in Dal Yong Jin's books *Korea's Online Gaming Empire* (2010) and *Mobile Gaming in Asia* (2017)

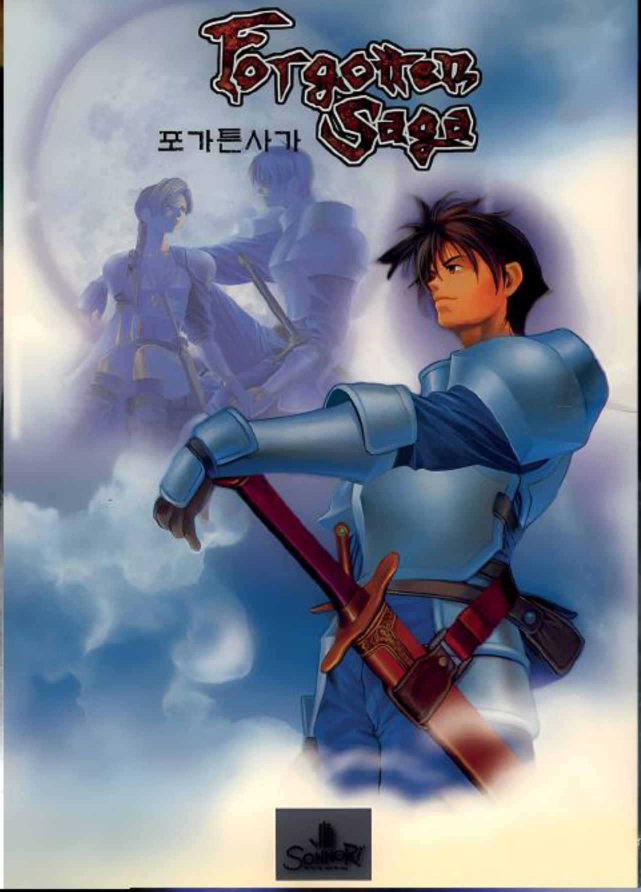


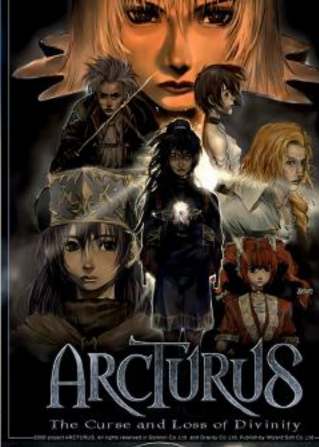
이올린(Iyolin) - 23세(1207기준). 팬드래건의 왕녀. 그라테스에서 부왕과 오빠들이 모두 사망하고 나라마저 무너질때 팬드래건의 재상 드라우프니르에 의해 동생 라시드왕자와 함께 팬드래건의 잔존세력을 이끌고 다갈로 망명하였다. 그후, 세월이 흐르면서 반제국의 레지스탕스활동의 중심인물이 되었으며 구 팬드래건의 세력을 이끌고 각지에서 제국군을 괴롭히는 게릴라 활동을 벌이고 있는 중이다. 어린 나이에 아버지와 오빠들을 잃은 그녀는 차갑고 잔인한 성격으로 변해갔으며, 특히 제국군에 대해서는 공포의 존재로 네메시스(복수의 여신)'이라는 별명으로 불리기도 한다. 그녀가 제국군에 의해 운송중인 구팬드래건왕국의 신기(신기) 글로리아의 왕석(the hole of gloria) 을 탈취하면서 이야기가 시작되게 된다.

[엘류어드]
여자들이나 모아놓고 뒤에서 다른
사람 험담이나 하고 있는 주제에..
자신있으면 덤벼보시지...

A selection of South Korean RPGs: screenshots of *Astonishia Story*, *Nostalgia of Magic*, *Ys II Special*, *War of Genesis*, *Legend of Ancient Dragon - Pursival* and *Arcturus*; box art from *Rhapsody of Zephyr*, *Forgotten Saga*, *Arcturus*, *Magna Carta*, *The War of Genesis II* and *The War of Genesis III - Part 2*.

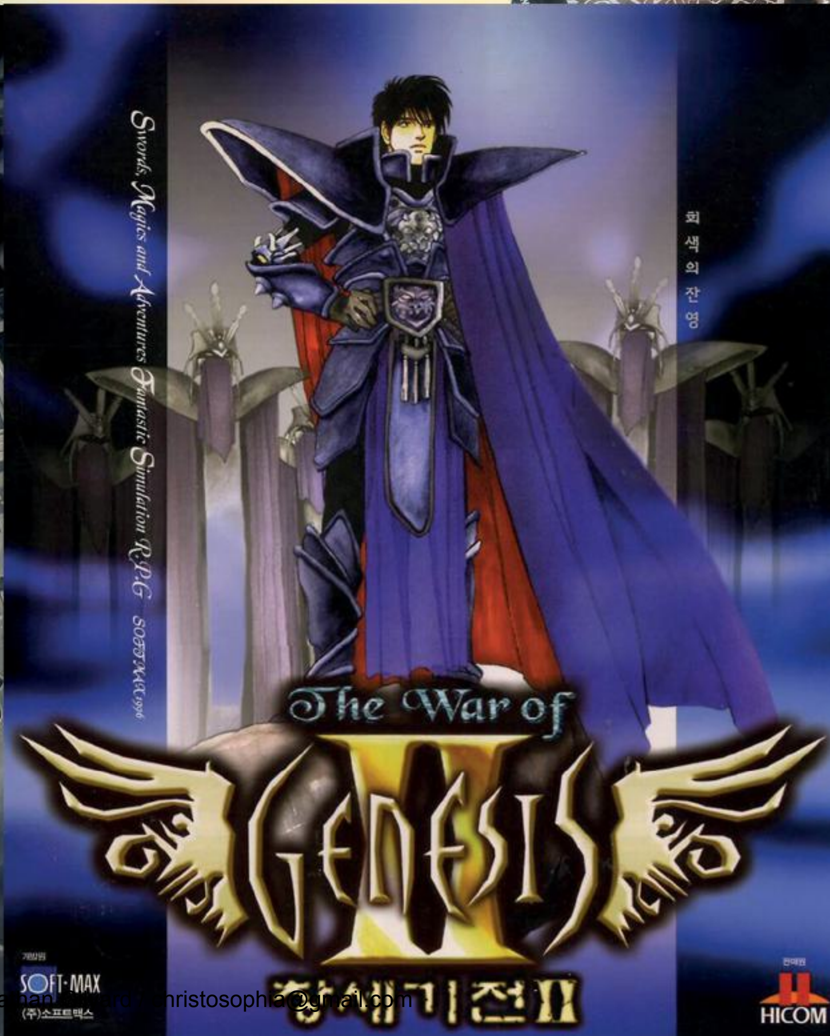
CD
창세기전외전
西風의狂詩曲
서풍의 광시곡
MAX


Forgotten Saga
포가튼사가
SONNORI


ARCTURUS
The Curse and Loss of Divinity

MAGNA CARTA
마그나카르타
SOFTMAX

THE WAR OF GENESIS III PART.2
창세기전 3 파트 2
SOFTMAX


Swords, Magics and Adventures Fantasic Simulation R.P.G SOFTMAX 1996
회색의 잔영
The War of GENESIS II
창세기전II
개발원
SOFT·MAX
(주)소프트맥스
판매원
HICOM

Prepared exclusively for Jonathan [illegible] christosophia@gmail.com

Fan-Translations

This section will cover games that were never officially translated into English, but had translation patches made by dedicated fans. People usually associate fan translations with obscure Japanese titles from the '80s and '90s, but there are still many games being released without English versions.

Twice a year, a massive event called Comiket (Comic Market) is held in Tokyo, with over half a million attendees over three days. Besides comics, movies and crafts, a huge number of indie games are also presented. In Comiket 97 alone, held in December 2019, over 50 indie games were released.

These games are created by *doujin* circles – amateur development groups, usually of university students – an important but little known part of the Japanese game industry. Previously a Japan-only affair, in the 2010s companies like Carpe Fulgur began localising titles like 2006's *Chantelise – A Tale of Two Sisters* and 2007's *Recettear: An Item Shop's Tale*.

The rise of Steam as a digital distribution platform and the success of these first international *doujins* led to more translations, but there are still many old and new games that never make it outside of their regions.

1F The Root of Gensokyo's Great Tree
1F
26.7%
Mini Map
HP 159/159
MP 9/9
HP 152/152
MP 19/19
HP 145/145
MP 18/18
HP 96/96
MP 22/22
Lv3
Lv4
Reimu
Lv3
Keine
Lv3
Marisa

Labyrinth of Touhou: Gensokyo and the Heaven-Piercing Great Tree was first released at Comiket 84 in 2013, got a fan-translation on the same year and then an official English release in 2021

As shown in the previous articles, this includes hundreds of RPGs from China and South Korea, but also some from France, Germany, Turkey, Spain, Hungary, Italy, the Czech Republic, Poland, Finland, etc. The steep language barrier means most of those are nigh unplayable for the average gamer – and that's before factoring the risk of mojibake*,* when conflicting character encoding standards cause text to be garbled.

Luckily for us, there are groups of kind souls who pour much effort into creating fan-translations for some of these games. One of the most famous fan-translations is *Mother 3*, a Game Boy Advance sequel to the cult classic *Earthbound*. The game was released in 2006 in Japan, but never reached Western audiences.

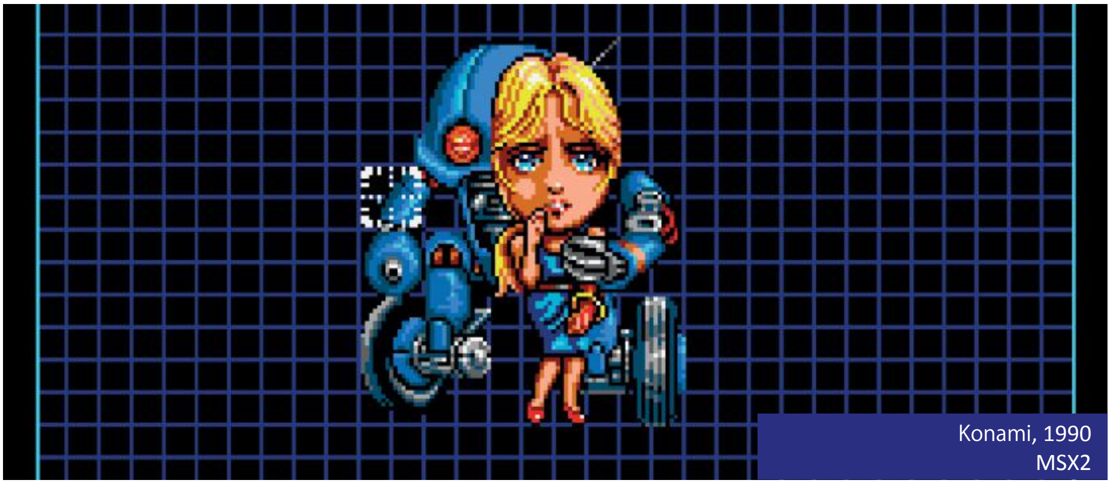
In 2007, a professional translator named Clyde Mandelin organised a team to fan-translate the game into English. After 16 months of work, they released the patch and quickly got more than 100,000 downloads, showing just how much interest in the game there was.

However, even after the group offered the entire translated script for free to Nintendo, there's still no announcement of an official English release of the game. It's truly a shame that anyone trying to legally play games must go through such a hassle. Some of these games are real gems that are sadly kept away from people who would love to buy and play them.

Not all companies are so closed-minded. In 2011, JAST USA worked with the Dakkodango fan-translation group to make the English version of 2003's *Aselia the Eternal*. Similarly, *Divinity: Original Sin 2* was fully translated into Portuguese by Nasher, a fan-translator. Larian contacted him and officially added the translation.

In the following pages we shall list some of the most interesting fan-translated games a curious CRPG player can find, and hope that someday they receive an official English release.

SD Snatcher



Konami, 1990
MSX2

Back in the '80s, right after creating the very first *Metal Gear* game, Hideo Kojima developed *Snatcher* (1988), a *Blade Runner*-like adventure game/visual novel. Set in a cyberpunk future, you play as Gillian Seed, an agent sent to investigate the rise of "snatchers" – biological machines that are disguising themselves as humans.

Filled with memorable characters, gripping plot twists and Kojima's exotic style, *Snatcher* was a huge critical and commercial hit. In its wake, instead of a sequel, came *SD Snatcher* – a remake of *Snatcher*, now as an RPG with cute "super deformed" art.

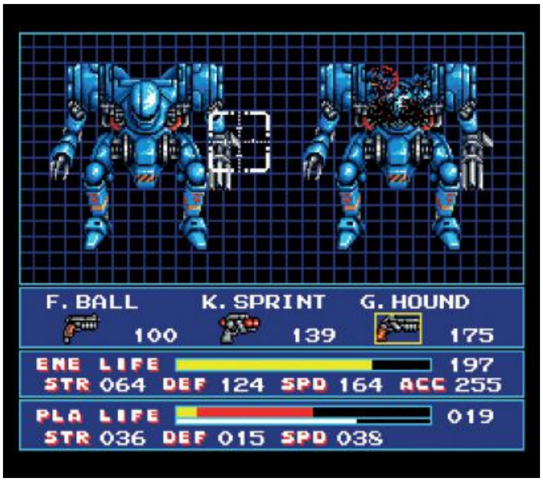
Sporting a slightly different story, the game now plays as a typical JRPG. You walk around town, looking for clues and talking to NPCs, then delve into dungeons and fight foes in turn-based FPS combat.

Yes, turn-based FPS combat! Each turn, you choose a weapon and use the reticule to aim at a point on the screen – you can fire at the enemy's body to deal damage, or at specific points to decrease its stats and eventually cripple it. For example, attacking its eyes/sensors will reduce its accuracy, while attacking its weapons will decrease its attack.

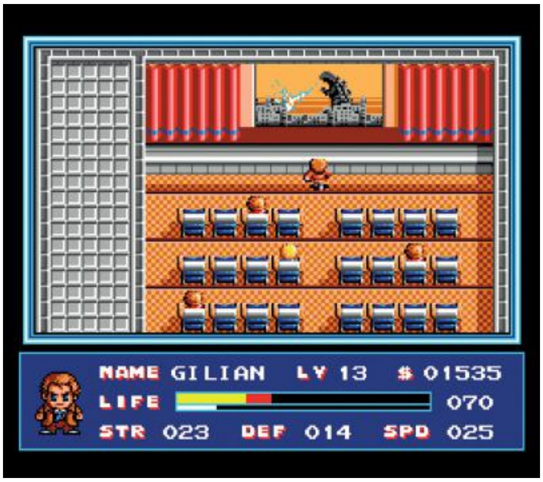
The twist is that before you fire the enemy will likely move, meaning aiming for small areas is tricky – you'll have to anticipate its move or stop it from moving by destroying its legs. Different guns also have different speeds and damage areas, so choosing your equipment is important.

It's an extremely original system that suits the game perfectly. It even throws some curveballs, such as enemies using shields or hostages. Unfortunately, the system isn't well-employed and ends up being slow and repetitive – battles happen too often and take a long time to beat, requiring you to first weaken the enemy and then slowly damage it.

Overall, *SD Snatcher* is more of a curiosity for die-hard Kojima fans. Still, its novel combat system and the fact it was one of the first Japanese games to be fan-translated more than earns it its reputation. **FE**

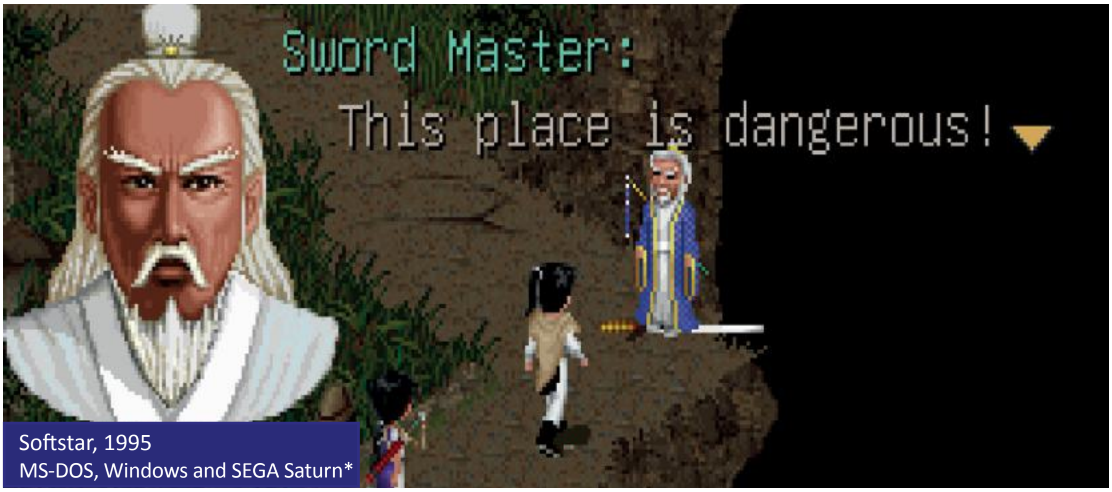


The combat has a novel presentation, as you aim and shoot in turn-based battles, but it's simplistic under the hood



You'll go to the cinema to watch *Godzilla*, visit a bar named Outer Heaven and own a Metal Gear – yup, this is a Kojima game

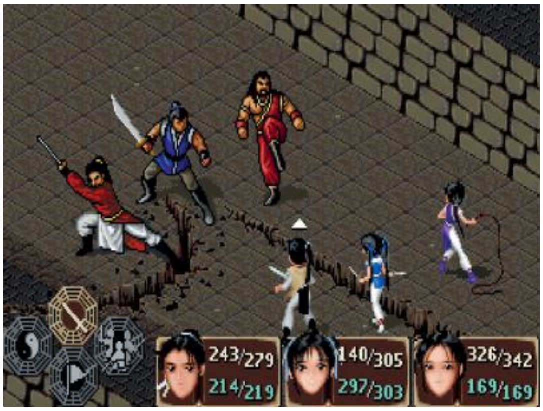
Chinese Paladin


Sword Master:
This place is dangerous!

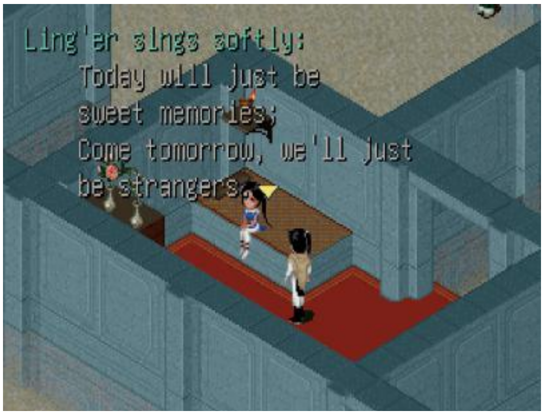
Softstar, 1995
MS-DOS, Windows and SEGA Saturn*

If there was only one game I could tell people to play to learn more about Chinese videogames, this would be it. *Chinese Paladin* did for xianxia what Jing Yong (pen name of Louis Cha, author of *The Legend of the Condor Heroes* and *The Heaven Sword and the Dragon Sabre*, among others) did for the re-popularisation of wuxia. It's a cultural revival and a cornerstone of the genre – not only the storytelling but also the literary and visual works that go into it.

***The Windows version of Chinese Paladin is now freeware. Those interested in playing it should also download *SDLPal*, a mod which adds a few very useful features.**



Combat is turn-based, with up to three party members; during battles, powerful attacks can leave permanent marks on the ground


Ling'er sings softly:
Today will just be
sweet memories;
Come tomorrow, we'll just
be strangers

While translating from the Chinese required some compromises (especially in poems), the excellent story remains perfectly enjoyable

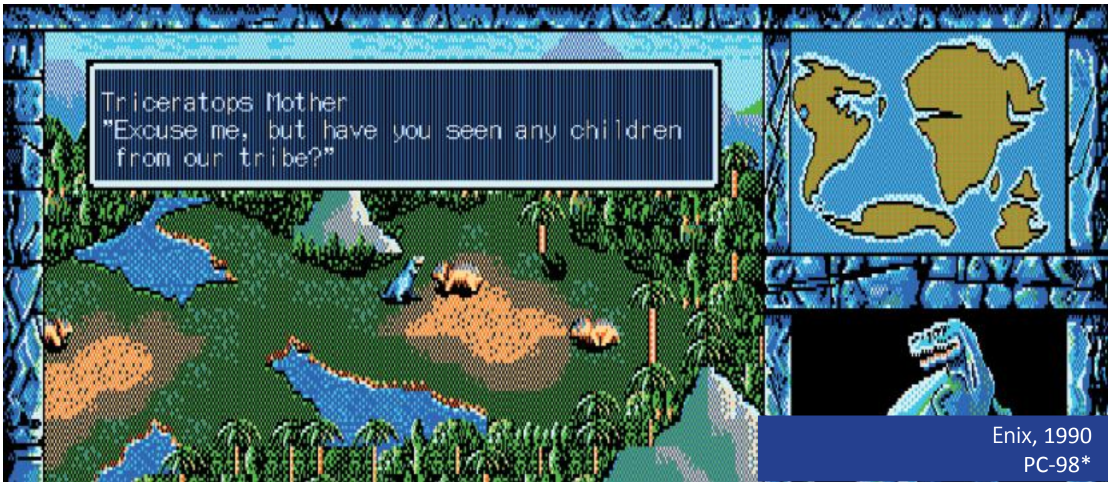
When I first opened the manual, I was met with beautiful watercolour prints accompanied by poetry introducing each character. The game's beauty continues into its opening theme and upwards scroll as the towering peaks slowly jut out of the fog and cranes fly across the screen. A simple wish that starts with the main character's fantasy of becoming a hero like their parents quickly tumbles into a fantastical rabbit hole filled with experiences of love, loss and sacrifice.

The game itself is an isometric turn-based RPG with many familiar elements and few fun extras not often seen in western RPGs. Each character has their own unique animation; these animations can change throughout the game via unique story items that you find. Another unusual one is the various poisons that can affect the characters – sometimes you can counter one type of poison with another, but they may also have negative effects such as instant death. Between these unique, fun elements, the complex dungeons, and a gripping storyline, this game is a must-play for anyone interested in getting into Chinese RPGs.

Chinese Paladin became one of Taiwan's biggest game franchises, with a seventh game being released in 2021, as well as numerous MMOs and mobile games. Its cultural influence also expanded into novels, manhuas, and even three television dramas. I truly believe that without this game we would not have seen other popular xianxia stories come out, such as *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation*, the original work behind the popular show *The Untamed* (2019).

Growing up in the US, I never had anyone to share the experience of this game with. But I do remember many people sharing their excitement about *Final Fantasy* with me. I hope that with this franchise finally reaching English-speaking players, many of you will start on this journey with me. **JOL**

E.V.O.:
The Theory of Evolution



Triceratops Mother
"Excuse me, but have you seen any children from our tribe?"

Enix, 1990
PC-98*

One of the hidden gems of the Super Nintendo was *E.V.O.: Search for Eden* (1992), an unusual side-scrolling action RPG based on evolution. You began as a primitive fish over 300 million years ago and slowly evolved across the ages – first into more advanced fish, then into amphibians, dinosaurs and mammals, ending at the Ice Age and the first humans.

What few people know is that *E.V.O.* was actually a remake of an earlier game released only for PC-98: *46億年物語 -THE 進化論* – or "*4.6 Billion Year Story: The Theory of Evolution*". Now fully fan-translated as *E.V.O.: The Theory of Evolution*, it's worth a look.

As in its SNES counterpart, you begin playing in the ocean, millions of years ago. But the first difference quickly appears: combat here is turn-based.

As you defeat enemies, you earn EVO points, required to upgrade your stats: Vitality (hit points), Endurance (defence), Wisdom (special abilities) and Attack (damage). Each has a threshold, so, once you invest enough points in a stat, your creature evolves.

The stat screen shows a graph with all possible evolution forms in each era, but it's a very confusing system, since stats are presented as cardinal directions but don't work as such, e.g. Wisdom points north, but sometimes it leads to an evolution that's south or east of your current one, making it hard to plan ahead.

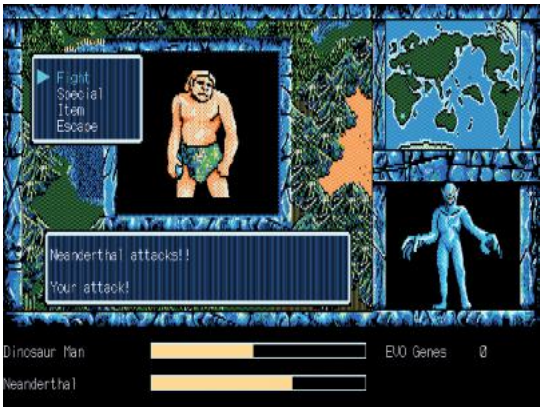
As you evolve and complete quests – which usually require talking to certain NPCs or visiting certain areas – you'll jump millions of years into the next chapter, where new evolutions and perils await.

The game is divided into six chapters, and here we see another big difference from the SNES remake: the story is much larger in scope, going all the way into the far future. And it involves not only the goddess Gaia acting as your guide, but also aliens controlling Earth's evolution under orders from Lucifer!

In the end, *Theory of Evolution* is an amazing concept stuck inside a simple and heavily dated RPG. There's no doubt that the SNES remake is the superior game, but the original still manages to stand out by offering a much weirder and more far-reaching story.

If evolving all the way from Cambrian creatures to future humanoids sounds like a cool idea, then give *Theory of Evolution* a try – it's always fun to explore games that experiment with creative settings. **FE**

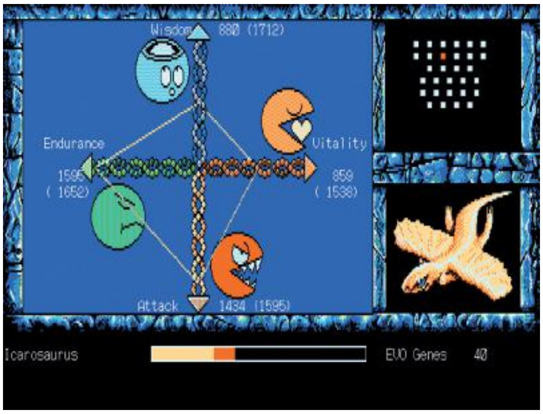
***You can get the fan-patch for *E.V.O.* at the 46 Oku Men website, which also contains a great guide on how to emulate the PC-98.**



Neanderthal attacks!!
Your attack!

Dinosaur Man
EVO Genes 0
Neanderthal

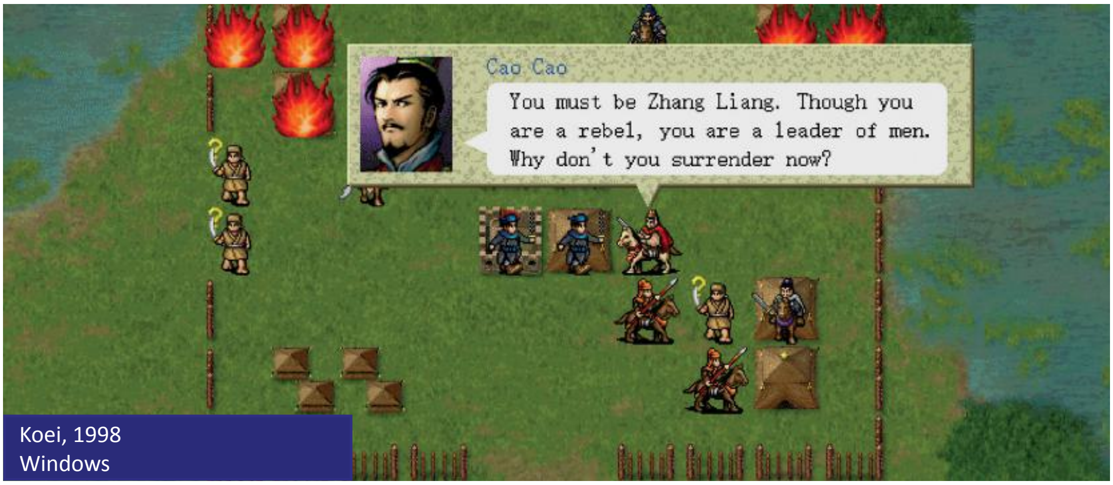
Combat is turn-based and very simple: there are few possible actions and stats are very important, making high-level enemies unkillable unless you grind



Wisdom 880 (1712)
Endurance 1595 (1652)
Vitality 858 (1538)
Attack 1434 (1595)
Icarosaurus
EVO Genes 40

Each chapter offers several playable creatures, some of them historically accurate, others not; if you reach an evolutionary dead end, you'll get one of many humorous bad endings

The Legend of Cao Cao



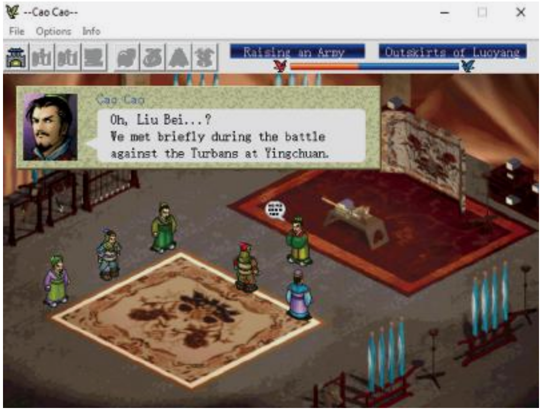
You must be Zhang Liang. Though you are a rebel, you are a leader of men. Why don't you surrender now?

Koei, 1998
Windows

I've been a sucker for *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* ever since playing it on the Nintendo back in the early '90s, later reading the story in its huge entirety back in 2000. I'm not the only fan of this historical epic, since there is quite a long list of movies and games based upon this Chinese classic.

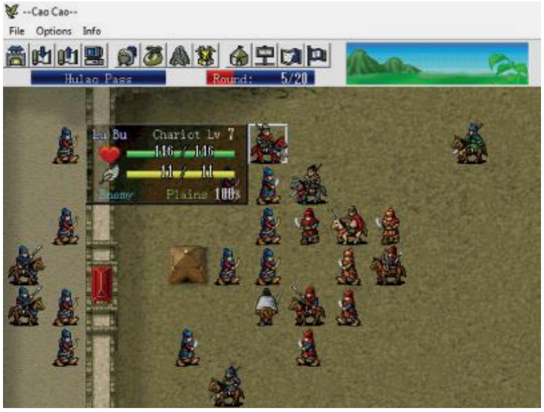
The Legend of Cao Cao is one of these many games, a turn-based strategy RPG similar to the *Fire Emblem* series, published by Japanese developer Koei.

Dozens of mods have been created for *Legend of Cao Cao*, from more campaigns around the Three Kingdoms characters to entirely new games. The *Legend of Lu Bu* mod is highly recommended, and also available in English.



Oh, Liu Bei...?
We met briefly during the battle against the Turbans at Yingchuan.

The game retells Cao Cao's role in the *Romance of Three Kingdoms* novel quite faithfully, despite adding some bits of humour



The massive roster of heroes in the novel makes for interesting battles, as enemies have their own personalities and fighting styles

You play as the legendary general Cao Cao, from his rise as a young officer helping to control a peasant rebellion to his gradual climb to power. The game requires you to make important moral choices, and if you follow the power-hungry path the story follows events from the novel. However, if you choose to neglect power in pursuit of what is morally correct, then the game goes on a completely different path in a quite awesome way.

No matter what way you choose, you will find yourself having to defeat enemy armies with troops of varying capabilities. Your primary units are infantry, cavalry and archers, but adding to the fun are also other units, such as barehanded brawlers, chariot riders, and spellcasters who can boost abilities, heal injured allies or cast status effects on enemies.

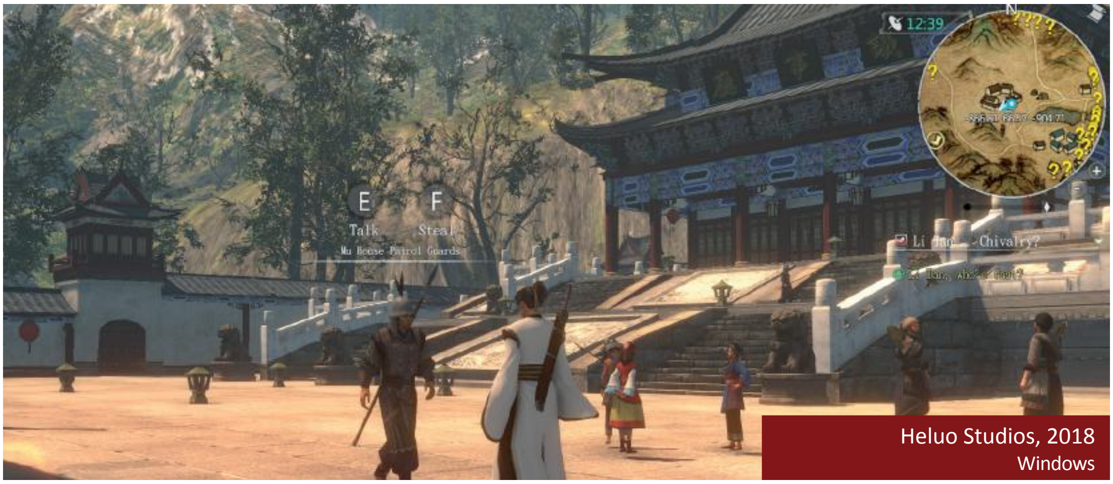
Equipment can be purchased and characters also increase in level and combat skill through fighting. Special events can also occur in battle, usually when two opposing officers meet in a battle where they historically fought each other.

There are also different ability scores, based roughly on who appeared stronger or more tactically brilliant than peers in the novel.

The graphics are simple, with well-designed pixelated animations to denote units on static terrain. Some of the animated scenes are beautiful, like when rival warriors face off against one another or during conversations that Cao Cao will have while speaking to members of his court or war council.

Legend of Cao Cao is actually the third game of Koei's *Legends* series (英傑伝). The previous two titles focused on Liu Bei and Zhuge Liang, Cao Cao's rivals during the Warring States period. However, the *Legend of Cao Cao* is widely considered the best and it's the one I recommend playing. **DT**

Ho Tu Lo Shu:
The Books of Dragon



Heluo Studios, 2018
Windows

While most Taiwanese RPG makers tend to mimic traditional JRPG gameplay, Heluo Studio is different. Since its first game, *Heroes of Jin Yong* (1996), it has focused on player freedom, creating non-linear RPGs full of choices and consequences. *Ho Tu Lo Shu* (河洛群俠傳) continues this approach, now as a 3D open-world RPG.

You play as a modern-day gamer transported into a wuxia (ancient Chinese martial arts) world, and must now find a way back home. With no hand-holding, the game releases you into a large, seamless world full of towns, sects, temples and secrets, complete with day-night NPC schedules, faction reputations and over a dozen charismatic companions you can recruit.

Ho Tu Lo Shu has dialogue choices and skill checks, but also tracks your personality based on how you act during quests: fighting your way into a fortress is reckless, but stealing a guard's armour to disguise yourself will mark you as evil (for stealing) and reserved (for sneaking around). This system leads to multiple quest outcomes, personality perks and endings.

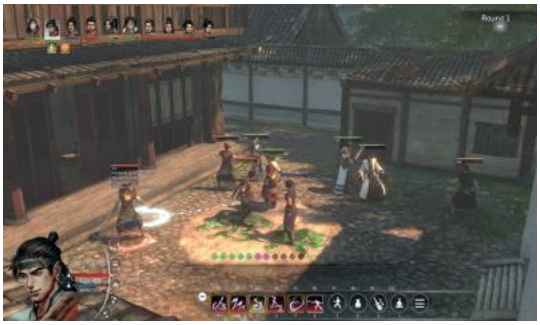
The turn-based combat is a highlight, offering challenging battles against all sorts of animals and martial artists. To conquer them, there are seven weapon types and over a hundred skills you can learn from martial arts manuals hidden all over the world. This provides plenty of build options, as attacks can have different ranges and costs, but also inflict status effects like poison, confusion, broken ribs or even sealed ki points, which reduce enemies' action points.

On the negative side, *Ho Tu Lo Shu* clearly suffers from a limited budget. Its visuals are dated; its environmental variety, and its UI and camera, are very rough. Still, the biggest issue is the language barrier. Heluo's previous titles, *Tale of Wuxia* (2016) and *Tale of Wuxia: The Prequel* (2017), were criticised for their poor English translations. This time they didn't even release one, so a fan-translation was made using DeepL. While definitely playable, it butchers some dialogues, wordplay and part of the UI, becoming a high barrier.

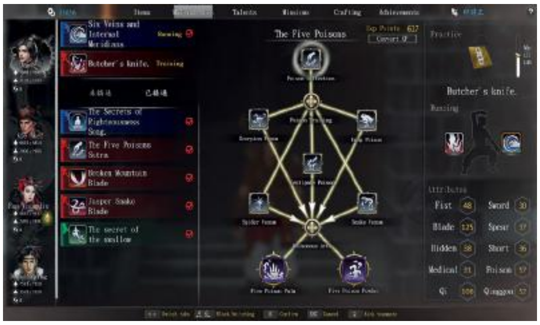
Worse, there's no translation whatsoever for all the extra content on Steam Workshop. Thanks to a large modding community, *Ho Tu Lo Shu* has received many Chinese-only mods that fix bugs, redo cut content or add new weapons, armour, skills, characters and story arcs from famous wuxia novels and TV dramas.

All this gives *Ho Tu Lo Shu* a bittersweet taste. It's a complex, well-designed and engaging RPG but, unless you can play it in Chinese, it will constantly feel like the full experience is beyond your reach. **FE**

***Ho Tu Lo Shu* can be translated as *Heroes of Heluo,* and it's a direct sequel to *Heroes of Jin Yong,* one of the most important Chinese RPGs from the '90s.**

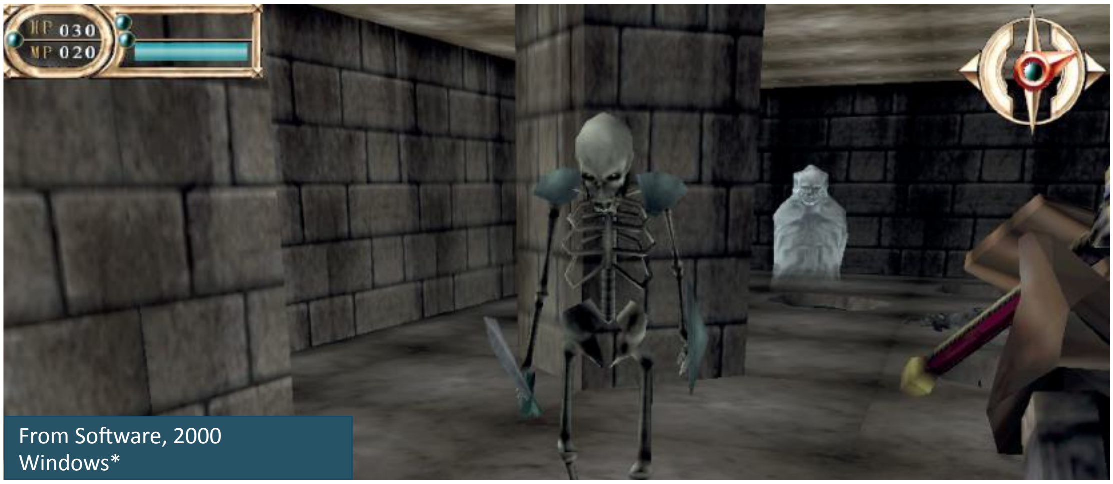


The battles are a main draw point, pitting your party against monks, sword saints, drunken masters, eagle tamers, poison maidens and all sorts of other martial artists



There are over 130 martial arts manuals in the game, teaching everything from new attacks and skills to poison recipes and beast-taming techniques

Sword of Moonlight: King's Field Making Tool

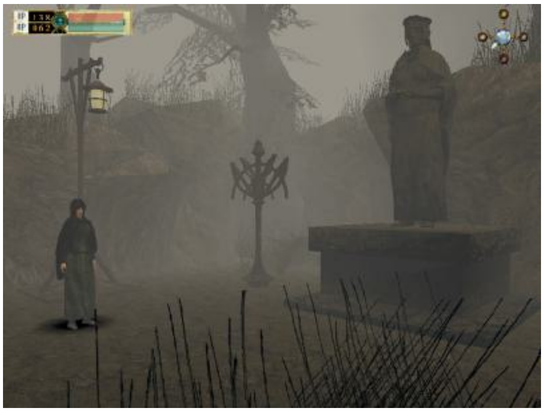


From Software, 2000
Windows*

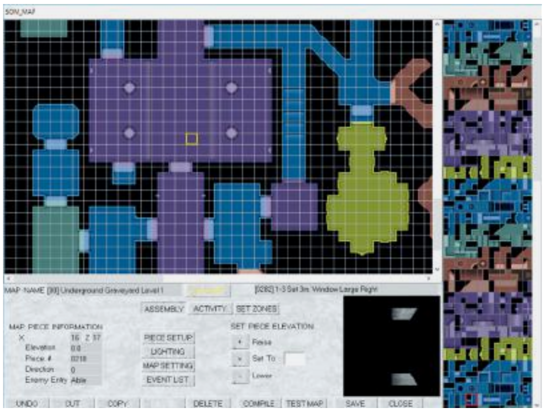
*Visit www.swordofmoonlight.com, where you can find the game's fan-translation and a small community creating their own games.

Dark Souls took the world by storm in 2011, awing gamers with its gothic atmosphere, high difficulty, rewarding exploration and cryptic lore. While it was the game that put From Software in the mainstream, many fans will be quick to point out that *Demon's Souls* (2009) already had these elements.

However, very few will recall that From Software had been following a similar design philosophy since its very first game, *King's Field*, released in 1994.



Moratheia, by Ben Connolly, is a great game created using *Sword of Moonlight*; a bit faster-paced, it plays like a cross between *King's Field* and *Demon's Souls*



MAP NAME [00] Underground Graveyard Level 1

[0282] 1-3 Sat 3m Window Large Right

MAP PIECE INFORMATION
X 16 Z 37
Elevation 0.0
Piece # 0218
Direction 0
Enemy Entry Able

SET PIECE ELEVATION
+ Raise
× Set To
- Lower

The editor allows you to create your own games or fully modify the included *King's Field 1* remake, but the editor is too outdated and limited to be of any real use today

It's impressive: *Ultima Underworld* had just come out two years earlier in the US, yet From Software was already taking the revolutionary concept of a fully 3D first-person RPG and adding its own dark twists.

But a word of caution: don't expect the fast-paced combat of *Dark Souls* or *Bloodborne*. *King's Field 1* was a launch title for the original PlayStation. Its graphics have aged terribly and the gameplay is slow and clunky – something that From Software cleverly subverted to turn the game into a zen-like, introspective experience.

The *King's Field* series fully embraces its slow speed. Combat is challenging, but it takes a backseat to the atmosphere and exploration. Above all, these games are about carefully delving into a desolate world, collecting items, solving puzzles and piecing together the story.

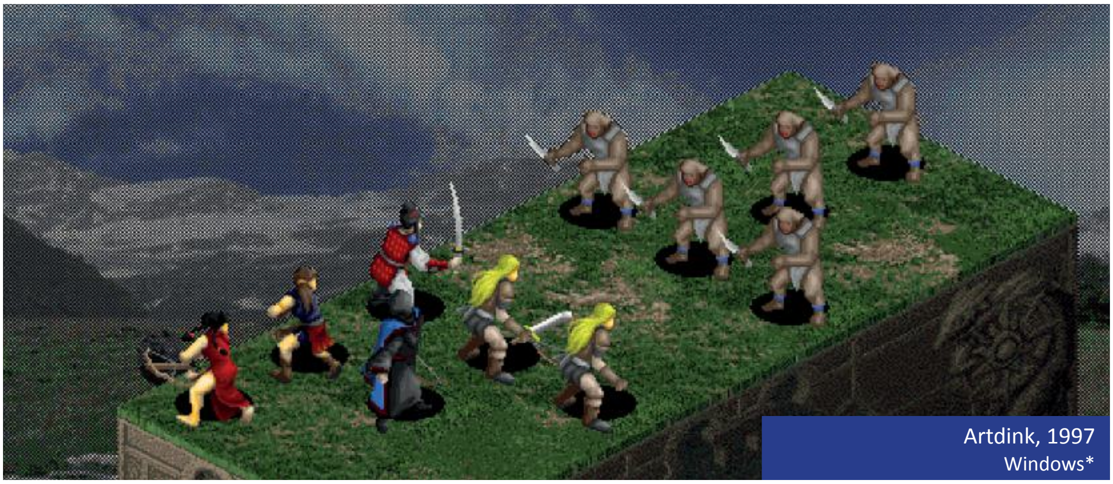
The series had four main games – all for consoles. But in 2000, From Software released *Sword of Moonlight*, a toolset for making *King's Field*-like games on the PC. It even came with a remake of the first game that you could play, or open in the editor and modify freely.

It was released only in Japan, but fans eventually translated it and began to create games in English. Today there are a few fan-made guides and tools to help people make their own games but, honestly, the heavily dated editor and engine stands as little more than a curiosity, and the remake of *King's Field 1* isn't a good introduction to the series.

If you want to experience the lineage that led to *Dark Souls*, it's better to start with the fourth title in the series, *King's Field: The Ancient City* (2001), or with *Shadow Tower Abyss* (2003), a horror spin-off game.

However, if you played those and still want more, there's enjoyment to be found in the *Sword of Moonlight* fan-made games, such as the short tales of *Dark Destiny* and *Return to Melanat*, the puzzle-based challenge of *Trismegistus*, or the epic adventure of *Moratheia*. **FE**

Lunatic Dawn:
Passage of the Book



Artdink, 1997
Windows*

The world of Japanese PC RPGs contains many games that break away from the usual tropes of console JRPGs to deliver novel experiences. The Lunatic Dawn series is one of these oddities.

It started in 1993, with *Lunatic Dawn I* offering a procedurally-generated world with sandbox elements – you created a character, then started a new life as an adventurer, travelling between towns, taking jobs, earning money, buying better equipment, recruiting companions, exploring dungeons and fighting turn-based battles. And that's it: no arch-villain, epic story or even main goal, just life inside a fantasy world.

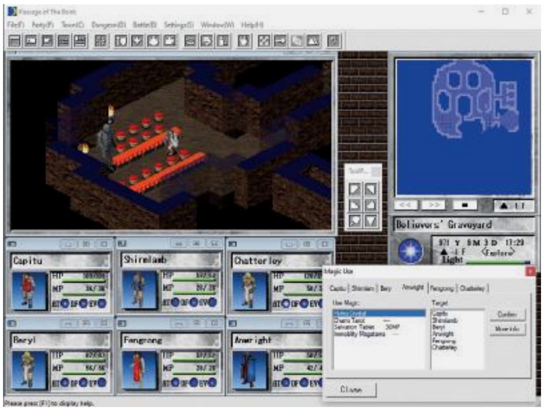
This formula was rather successful and spawned a long series of games. None were officially released in English, but 1997's *Lunatic Dawn*: *Passage of the Book* got a fan translation and it's widely considered the best entry point. It provides the same fantasy sandbox approach, but in a complex, hand-crafted world.

What's most impressive is how the world is fully simulated. Clearing monsters around a city will help it grow. Nations will attack each other, making cities flourish or become ghost towns. There are special events like tournaments, rare-item stores or bounties on certain NPCs. You can marry other adventurers, but actions like stealing or murdering will impact your alignment and can make companions leave you. Moreover, the game continues even if your main hero dies, so you can start anew and hear that the widow of your previous hero killed one of the dungeon bosses.

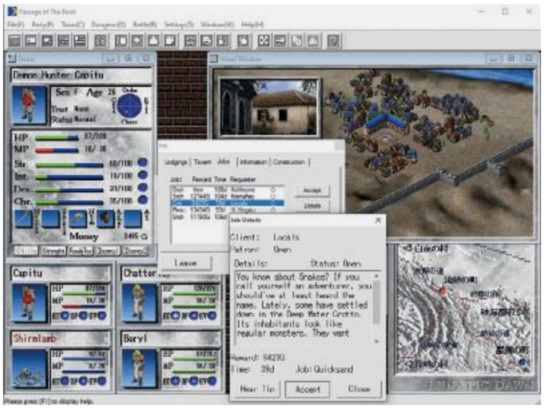
The downside is that all this complexity and freedom is presented in a rather unattractive way. The game follows an "early Windows" aesthetic, spreading itself across multiple resizeable windows and menus. It can feel more like a tool than a game, but that's a common criticism for Roguelikes as well. The images here should help you to decide to give it a try it or not.

The series continued with *Lunatic Dawn III* (1998) and *IV* (1999), which moved to *Diablo*-like real-time combat. *Odyssey* (1999) returned to turn-based combat but added a fixed story to the game. *The 3rd Book* (2000) would return to the classic sandbox formula, then *Tempest* (2001) radically changed the core gameplay into a linear first-person RPG. A final game, *The Book of Eternity*, was announced in 2009 then quickly cancelled, ending the series so far. **FE**

***Of all the Lunatic Dawn games, only *Book of Futures* and *Passage of the Book* got fan translations. You can get them at ROMhacking.net.**



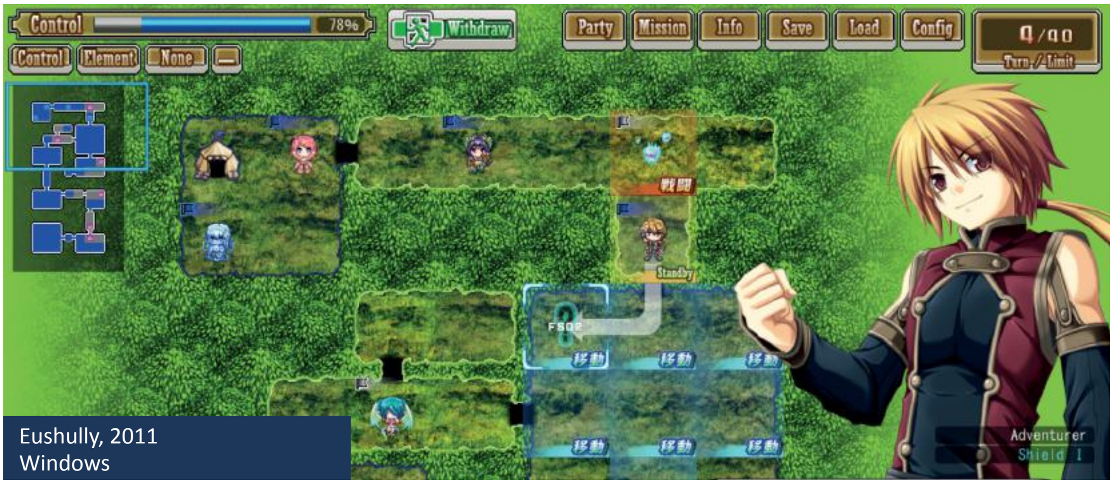
Dungeons in *Passage of the Book* are hand-crafted and explored in an isometric view; they are full of traps and roaming monsters – if you touch an enemy, combat begins



Client: Locals
Patron: Open
Details: Status: Open
You know about Snakes? If you call yourself an adventurer, you should've at least heard the name. Lately, some have settled down in the Deep Water Grotto. Its inhabitants look like regular monsters. They want
Reward: 8423G
Time: 39d Job: Quicksand
Hear Tip Accept Close

Visiting one of the towns, you enter the Inn and get hired for a job involving killing snakes inside a nearby dungeon, with 39 days to do it in

Kamidori Alchemy Meister



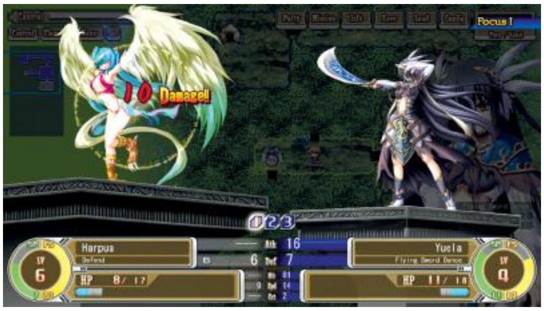
Eushully, 2011
Windows

***Kamidori* is a spiritual sequel to another of Eushully's games, called *Himegari Dungeon Meister* (2009), which was also fan-translated. It had two sequels, *Amayui Castle Meister* (2017) and *Amayui Labyrinth Meister* (2021).**

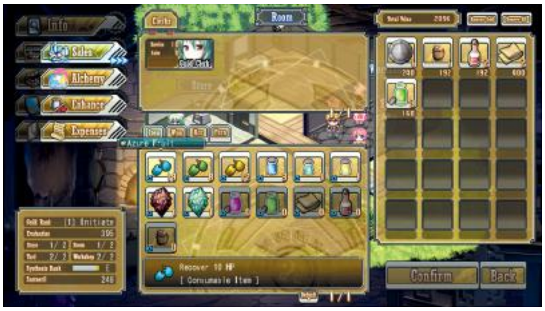
Kamidori Alchemy Meister / 神採りアルケミーマイスター is a Japanese eroge CRPG in which you play an apprentice alchemist setting up shop and moving up through his guild's ranks.

During this journey, you'll meet a large cast of characters asking for alchemical services, while old conflicts with foreign factions slowly come to the fore. Since this is a CRPG, your quest to promote peace, love and understanding is mostly pursued via battles.

You explore areas on a 2D turn-based overhead map, as in games like *Fire Emblem*, but areas here have a more dungeon-like design, with many tight corridors, hidden paths and treasures, locked doors, traps, areas only flying/swimming/digging characters can reach, tough optional enemies, etc.



When characters clash on the battlefield, they get to hit each other a number of times based on their speed, traits and attack range



Your store is where you perform alchemy, crafting items to sell, complete requests or strengthen your party members

Combat occurs when friendly and enemy units collide, with their stats, traits and skills determining how many attacks each side will perform, in which order and how much damage they'll deal. Ranged and magical attacks work in a similar way, though they can be entirely one-sided if an opponent has no retaliatory ranged attack of his or her own.

By exploring dungeons and defeating monsters, you gain alchemical ingredients, and this is where the real core of the gameplay lies. With these raw materials you can create equipment for your ever-increasing party of adventurers, as well as saleable items to help fund your store and crafting rooms.

The more you craft, the better your crafting rating becomes, allowing you to design truly valuable items and equipment, as well as furniture, workbenches, and other tools that further improve your skills and how much you can charge for items.

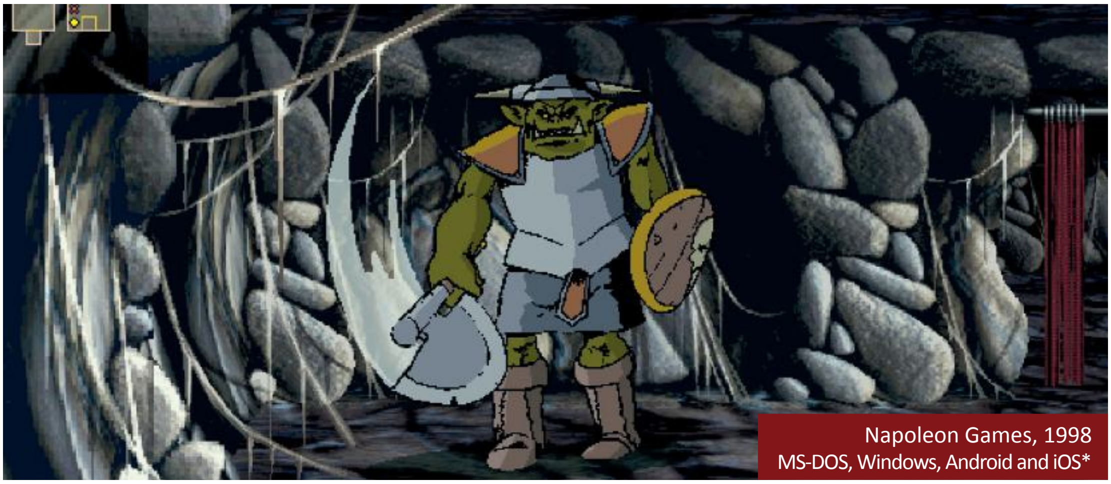
It's quite the gratifying cycle, and the game's dungeons all have optional objectives that award rare items, encouraging you to return for more ingredients.

The game's supporting cast is also diverse, with a large assortment of monsters and heroes that will join your fight as you progress (with even more heroes available in New Game+). This being an eroge game, many of these heroes will be generously proportioned young women.

Yes, while the first chapters of the game are merely "romantic", there's sex and nudity in the later portions, leaning into a "harem" kind of story. The game also has three different routes, depending on which of the three main heroines you romance.

While this aspect might turn some players away, *Kamidori Alchemy Meister* is an addictive game with a lot of replay value. Try it, especially if you enjoyed the old *Shining Force* series. **DT**

Gates of Skeldal



Napoleon Games, 1998
MS-DOS, Windows, Android and iOS*

Brány Skeldalu (translated as *Gates of Skeldal*) is a hidden gem from the Czech Republic. Originally an MS-DOS game, it was later released as freeware and ported to Android and iOS, thanks to a successful 2013 fundraiser by one of the game's original developers. The game also got an English translation but, sadly, it's mostly a crude, poorly made machine translation.

Regardless, the game is still worth a closer look. Your three starting characters wake up almost naked and with no memory. A parchment nearby explains that you were summoned from another world as a last attempt to stop a great evil from taking over the land. From there, the game follows in the spirit of old-school dungeon crawlers: exploration, puzzles and combat.

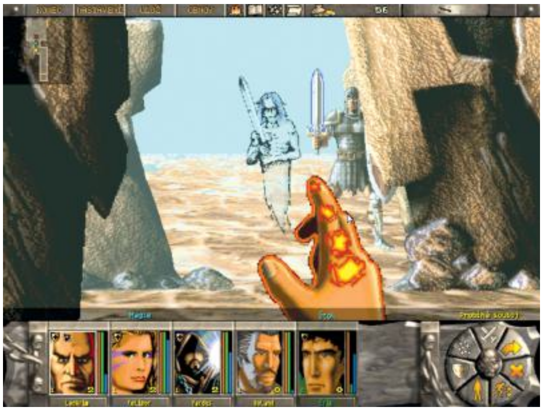
Gates of Skeldal has three defining features. Firstly, its hand-drawn art style, which looks good even today. Secondly, it came with a map editor, allowing players to easily mod it. Thirdly, it has a unique combat system.

Exploration is done in real time, but once you reach an enemy the action becomes turn-based. Your party will grow, up to six characters, and each can move separately. For example, you can move to attack the enemy from the sides, or shoot over your front-line warriors. Each turn, you plan what each character will do – attack, cast a spell, use items or move to a different tile. After planning the turn, you click on "execute" and watch the actions play out.

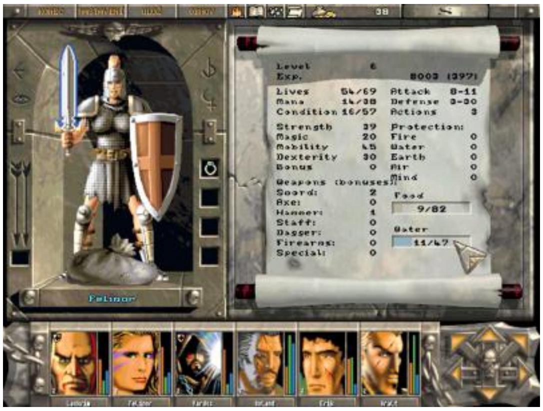
The game uses a classless system in which the player distributes points between four attributes, with weapon skills adding further bonuses. Weapons, armour and spells all have different requirements, but hybrid characters are still possible. Spell-casting is based on 35 magic runes, each with three levels of casting power. However, you need to find or buy the runes first. Some interesting spell combinations can be used in combat, and you must also keep an eye on your character's exhaustion level, plus food and water supplies.

The game was followed by two sequels. *Brány Skeldalu 2* (2002), also known as *The Fifth Disciple*, surprised fans by being more of an adventure game with light RPG elements. In 2016, Napoleon Games released the third game in the series: *7 Mages*. Inspired by Akira Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai* movie, the game returned to the series' roots of dungeon-crawling, with a party of seven characters. A good game on its own, it was also the first in the series to be officially translated into English. **PE**

***You can get the English translation plus many tools and fan-made adventures at www.skeldal.vyletnici.net.**



Despite being a first-person blobber, *Gates of Skeldal* allows the party to be split during combat and for puzzles; the warrior behind the ghost is actually one of my characters



```
Level            6
Exp.                  8003 (397)
Lives     54/69  Attack    8-11
Mana      14/38  Defense   0-00
Condition 16/57  Actions      3
Strength     39  Protection:
Magic        20  Fire         0
Mobility     45  Water        0
Dexterity    30  Earth        0
Bonus         0  Air          0
Weapons (bonuses):Mind        0
Sword:        2   Food
Axe:          0     9/82
Hammer:       1
Staff:        0   Water
Dagger:       0     11/47
Firearms:     0
Special:      0
```

The game's English translation was done via Google Translator and is very uneven, leaving some menus and texts still in Czech

Games we'll (likely) never play

To talk about cancelled games is a difficult and frustrating task. There's little concrete information, a lot of rumours and, sadly, enough cancelled games to fill an entire book. Restricting ourselves to CRPGs, there are numerous infamous titles such as *Deus Ex: Insurrection* and *Deus Ex 3*, *Alpha Protocol 2*, *Betrayal at Krondor*'s original sequel *Thief of Dreams*, SSI's *Project M*, *Arcanum 2*, *Armalion, Stonekeep 2, Tannhauser Gate, Witchwood, Knights of the Old Republic 3, Lord of the Rings: The White Council*, etc …

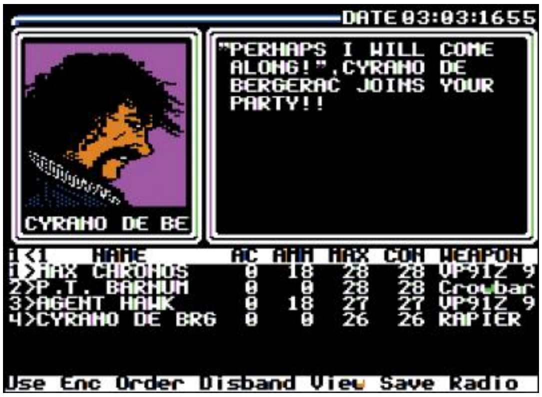
There are also cancelled MMORPGs, such as *Ultima Online 2*, *Shenmue Online*, the *World of Darkness* MMO, Blizzard's *Titan* and *Fallout Online/Project V13*. Plus all the countless Kickstarter projects that never made it, including Guido Henkel's *Deathfire*. There are even cancelled fan projects, such *Project Vaulderie,* a remake of *VtM: Bloodlines;* and *Chrono Trigger: Resurrection*, a 3D remake of *Chrono Trigger*.

The list goes on and on, and those are just the ones we know about. Most of them go silently into the night, with developers spending years of their lives without the audience even being aware they existed.

Those which we hear about lead to a special kind of fascination and desire, as usually all we get to see are teasing screenshots, exciting features and ambitious statements. Cancelled games have no bugs, no rushed parts, no balance issues, no boring battles – they live as enduring, perfect promises, made of both announced features and those perfect details that fans dreamed the game could have.

Thus, this isn't an absolute, extensive list, nor a best-of rank, but rather a collection of some of the most interesting ones that we know about. And a small tribute to those who worked so hard on games that never saw the light of day. For more on this topic, be sure to check Unseen64.net, an archive of cancelled games.

Meantime



"PERHAPS I WILL COME ALONG!",CYRANO DE BERGERAC JOINS YOUR PARTY!!

```
1<1    NAME          AC AMM MAX CON WEAPON
1>MAX CHRONOS        0  18  28  28 VP91Z 9
2>P.T. BARNUM        0   0  28  28 Crowbar
3>AGENT HAWK         0  18  27  27 VP91Z 9
4>CYRANO DE BRG      0   0  26  26 RAPIER
```

A mock-up screenshot of how *Meantime* might have looked like (courtesy of *8 bitweapon*)

Wasteland was a big hit back in 1988, so a sequel was the next logical step. Unfortunately, EA held the copyright and went on to make the horrible *Fountain of Dreams* (1990), but Brian Fargo and Interplay had a plan of their own – titled *Meantime*.

The game would involve time travel and feature historical characters such as Albert Einstein, Wernher von Braun and Amelia Earhart, as well as fictional ones. Fargo and his team worked a year and a half on the game, but it was never released.

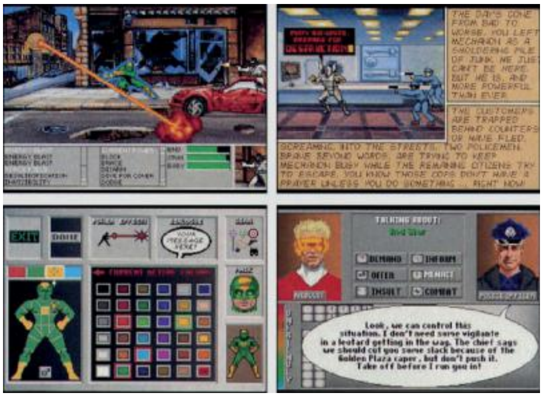
However, a recent trademarking of "Meantime" by a company linked to Brian Fargo's inXile has brought back hope to frustrated wannabe time travellers.

Champions

Why there are so few superhero RPGs? Hero Games tried to answer that in 1992, but never made it.

They attempted to adapt their tabletop ruleset, *Champions: The Super Role-Playing Game*, into a fully-fledged CRPG that allowed you to customise your powers: one-liners, spandex and everything.

The game even made it to the cover of April 1992's Computer Gaming World magazine, with a preview praising the conversation system – but that's the last we heard of it. All that remains are these screenshots.



While *Freedom Force* delivers on many of *Champions'* concepts, these screenshots are just too charming

The Black Hound

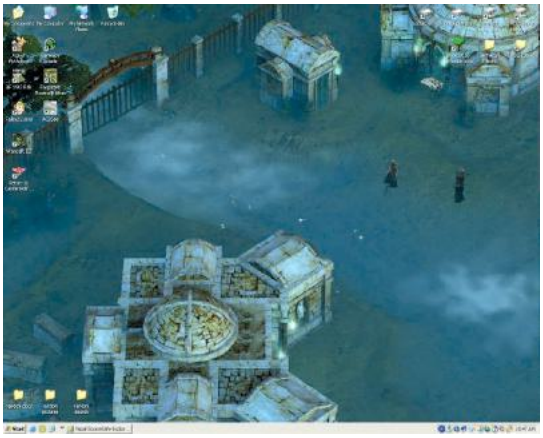
First announced in 2001 and commonly known as *Baldur's Gate III: The Black Hound*, this game bears no relation to the plots or characters of the previous *Baldur's Gate* games, wasn't developed by BioWare and didn't even use the famous Infinity Engine.

Instead, it was a Black Isle project, designed as a fully-3D RPG, powered by the newly developed Jefferson engine and using *D&D* 3rd Edition rules.

Led by Josh Sawyer, the game would have had players being haunted by the eponymous black hound – a physical manifestation of guilt. This would allow the player to see and interact with the guilt of others, but would also place them in the crosshairs of a cleric named May Farrow, from whom the hound originated.

While there were plans for a full trilogy of games, *The Black Hound* was cancelled in 2003, reportedly being about 80% complete at the time.

The project was having issues with the *D&D* licence but, regardless, the financial crisis of Interplay would close the Black Isle Studios shortly after.



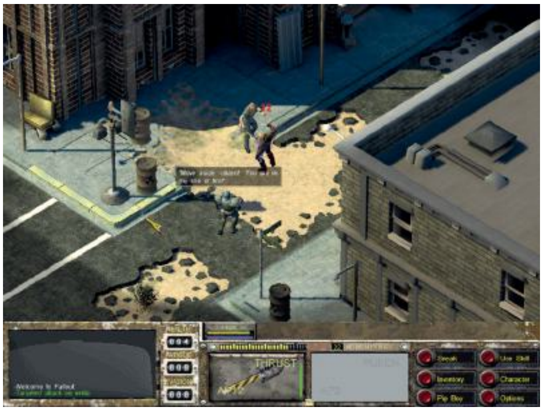
The only known screenshot of *The Black Hound* came from Josh Sawyer's desktop background

Fallout 3/Van Buren

The only other game to use the infamous Jefferson engine, Black Isle's original *Fallout 3* was code-named *Van Buren*, and was far into development when Interplay closed the studio down in 2003. It would have told the story of a fugitive prisoner in the American Southwest, featuring both turn-based and real-time combat modes.

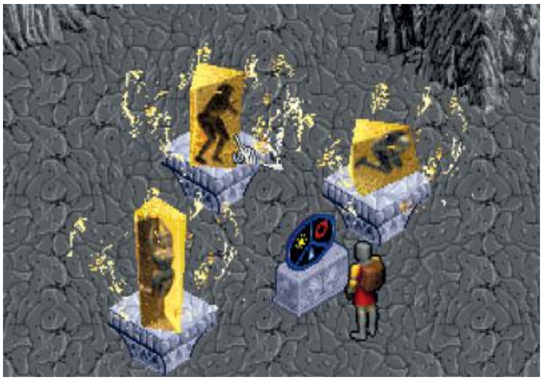
The project was canned, but some elements came back in *Fallout: New Vegas*, such as Caesar's Legion and the Burned Man. A tech demo was leaked and can still be downloaded online.

It's a title that still carries the dreams of those frustrated by Bethesda's *Fallout*. As such, a fan-made remake is currently in the works.



It may look dated today, but this screenshot was the dream of many RPG fans in the early 2000s

Ultima VIII: The Lost Vale



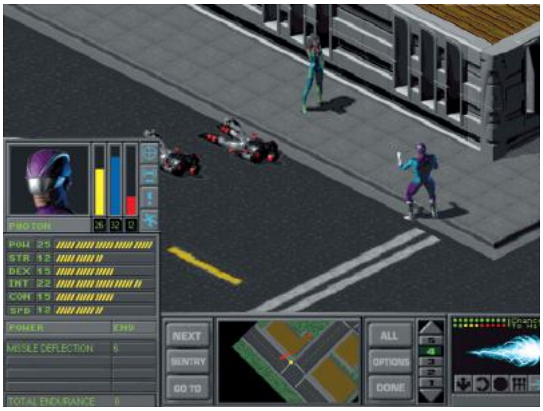
One of the few surviving images of *Lost Vale*, showing the three imprisoned gods

An expansion for *Ultima VIII: Pagan* (1994), *The Lost Vale* would have taken the Avatar to a fortress in the clouds, to release three ancient gods that might help him return to Britannia.

Unlike the other games listed here, it was 100% finished, ready to be copied and shipped. But then someone at EA changed their mind (probably due to *Ultima VIII*'s poor sales) and the game was shelved.

Or rather, it wasn't – *Lost Vale* wasn't archived in any way, and all its data was eventually lost. The only thing that survived was the game's box art, some screenshots and scarce details about the plot.

Guardians: Agents of Justice



The previews promised players would be able to pick up enemies and throw them into fully destructible buildings, thanks to the X-COM: Apocalypse engine

Guardians would have been another entry into the apparently cursed realm of superhero RPGs.

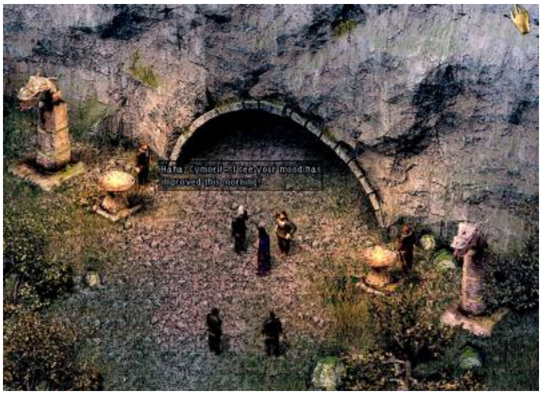
Developed by Simtex, the company responsible for strategy classics like *Master of Orion* (1993) and *Master of Magic* (1994), and published by MicroProse, it would have used the powerful X-COM: Apocalypse engine to allow players to control their very own teams of superheroes and save the day from evil-doers.

Other features included multiplayer, destructible environments and custom hero creation, with 46 superpowers, 17 skills and eight attributes to tinker with.

Sadly, the company closed down in 1997, and the game was never finished.

Stormbringer: Elric of Melniboné

The White Wolf. Last Emperor of Melniboné, white as a bleached skull, fated to wield the runeblade Stormbringer. Created in 1961 by Michael Moorcock, Elric of Melniboné is one of the most influential characters in fantasy literature.



Haha, Cymoril – I see your mood has improved this morning!

A screenshot from Snowball Interactive's *Stormbringer*, an ambitious blend of genres starring the last Emperor of Melniboné

Elric has been featured in several books, songs (*Hawkwind*, *Blue Öyster Cult, Diamond Head, Blind Guardian,* etc.), comics and tabletop RPGs, but his videogames seem cursed to be cancelled.

The first attempt was simply titled *Elric*, and it was an action RPG for the PlayStation made by Psygnosis. Mixing *Diablo* and *Legacy of Kain* influences, it was scheduled for a 1998 release, but never made it.

The second was *Stormbringer: Elric of Melniboné*, by Snowball Interactive. An ambitious title, it would have mixed several genres, allowing you to explore the world in real time, talk to NPCs, make story choices and fight individual foes with Elric, but also command a legion into large-scale RTS battles.

Unfortunately, the game was cancelled in 2000, as the developers couldn't secure a publishing contract. Thus, the only White Wolf in CRPGs is Geralt of Rivia – who Michael Moorcock claims is a rip-off of Elric.

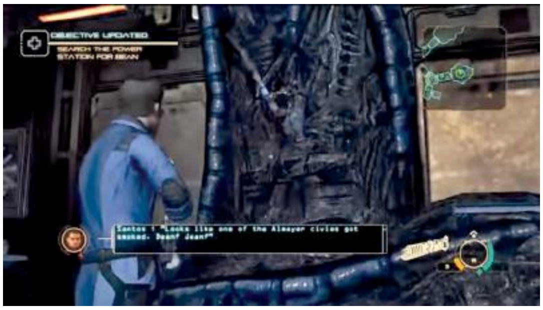
Aliens: Crucible

SEGA announced this *Alien*-based RPG back in 2006, to be developed by Obsidian Entertainment.

It had a clear *Mass Effect* influence and would focus heavily on survival, with real-time squad combat, lots of dialogue and even some base-building.

According to a post by developer Anthony Davis, it was a game of limited resources and permadeath, to create a sense of tension, of fearing the environment, instead of relying on the horror of the alien monster.

For example, if a companion was attacked by a face-hugger, players had to decide whether to mercy-kill them, put them in stasis or just keep playing, knowing they will eventually burst and die.



Crucible played as a third-person shooter/RPG hybrid, with a party of three other characters you could give orders to

The game was quietly cancelled in 2009, but a gameplay video preview showing various features surfaced in 2013 and can be seen on YouTube.

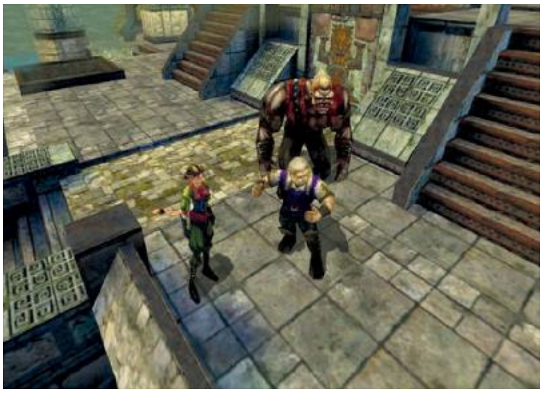
Torn

Torn is one of those games that shows just how important Black Isle Studios was back then.

Made by the team behind *Planescape: Torment*, it was a real-time RPG in an original setting, using a modified version of *Fallout*'s SPECIAL ruleset. It would also have been the company's first 3D game.

However, the team was unfamiliar with the new technologies and struggled with the Lithtech engine, while Interplay's financial issues got worse and worse.

In the end, *Torn* was announced in March 2001, shown at E3, and then quickly cancelled in June 2001. Yet, to this day, it's still remembered.



Players controlled a single character, cursed to bring misfortune to those around them, aided by up to five companions

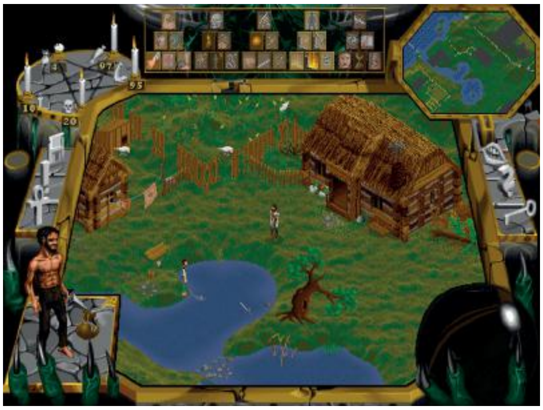
Tears

The Czech Republic is known today for games like *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*, *ARMA* (and *DayZ)* and the *Mafia* series, but it was also the source for many adventure games and RPGs in the '90s that were never released abroad, like *Brány Skeldalu* and *Rytíři Grálu*.

Tears was an MS-DOS RPG led by Karel Papík, the editor-in-chief of *Score*, a Czech game magazine. It was set to be the country's first big international hit: an isometric RPG set in a simulated world similar to *Ultima VII*'s, with day-night cycles and NPCs who had their own routines. The game had a simple point-and-click interface and real-time combat, with several spells to let you destroy your enemies or sneak past them.

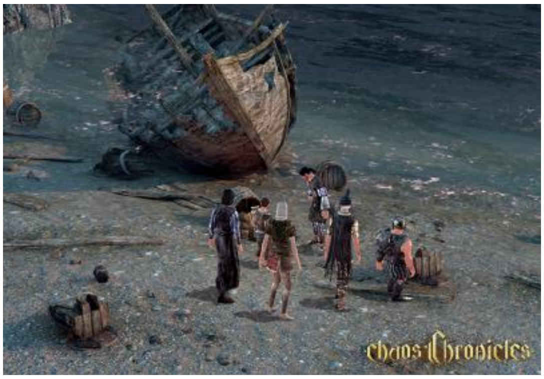
Online rumours say that Papík presented a demo to Interplay at the European Computer Trade Show '95, but they chose to sign BioWare and *Baldur's Gate* instead.

This demo can still be found on websites like www.oldgames.sk, but the full game was never completed.



The demo lets you explore a small town, a castle and a nearby dungeon, full of traps and undead monsters

Chaos Chronicles

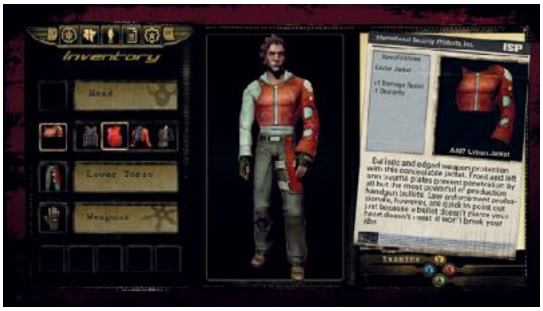


First revealed in August 2012, *Chaos Chronicles* stood out for being a revival of old-school RPGs in a time before games like *Pillars of Eternity* were announced

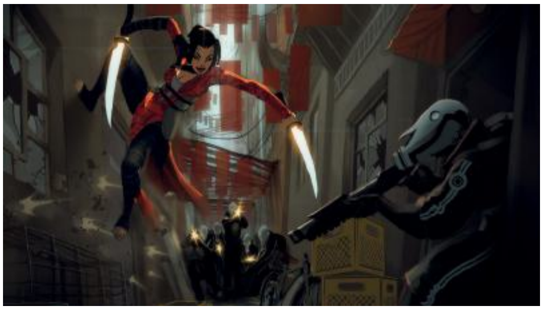
An isometric RPG with tactical combat based on *D&D* 3.5 rules, Coreplay's *Chaos Chronicles* was one of the most promising old-school RPGs of the early 2010s. However, legal issues between the developers and their publisher, bitComposer, led to its cancellation in 2013.

Oddly, parts of the game apparently ended up with an unrelated studio, Bigmoon Entertainment, who in 2017 released *Demons Age* (sic), an unfinished husk of a game that was quickly removed from Steam. Coreplay reformed as Ceres Games and crowd-funded a spiritual successor in 2018 called *Realms Beyond*, but the project has also run into problems and was cancelled.

Revolver (Jade Empire 2)



Revolver's producer Mark Darrah has a YouTube channel where he retells the development stories of *Jade Empire 2* and many other BioWare games



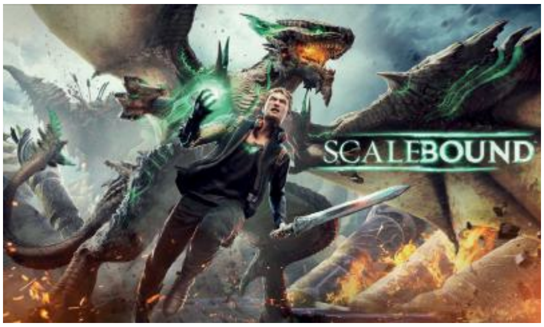
The book *BioWare: Stories and Secrets from 25 Years of Game Development* contains art from several of the game's versions, from ancient China to cyberpunk

This project has had many names and faces. Initially pitched as *Jade Empire 2,* it was a sequel with an open-world approach and several returning characters. However, the project was paused so the team could help out on *Mass Effect.* When they returned, they began changing it to "Jade Modern", a more modern setting from which all magic had vanished, and the main character would be tasked with helping it return.

The project suffered many reboots, and over time it lost all connections to *Jade Empire.* Later renamed *Revolver*, its story changed to follow a hero named Cole (or Carver), who fights against security forces in a futuristic Hong Kong-like city. The setting had shifted from a colourful fantasy realm into a serious and grim world. The gameplay had also changed, from a martial arts RPG to a modern action RPG, with parkour elements and real-time battles using guns and swords.

After years of reboots, the project was abandoned in 2008, with some design elements being reused in other games, such as the helmet designs in *Mass Effect 2* and the "story-within-a-city" approach in *Dragon Age 2*.

Scalebound



Scalebound was one of the main games at Xbox's 2016 E3 presentation, showing two players fighting a boss battle in co-operative mode

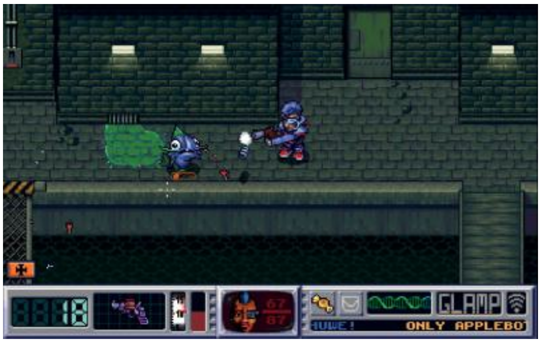
A third-person action-RPG by PlatinumGames for PC and Xbox One, *Scalebound* featured a man named Drew fighting alongside his dragon, with control shifting between these characters. It would've been the studio's first RPG, preceding *NieR: Automata.*

Heavily promoted by Microsoft as one of its top exclusives, *Scalebound* was first scheduled for 2016, postponed to 2017, and then suddenly cancelled. Fans raged against Microsoft, but Platinum's head producer Atsushi Inaba stated that "both sides had failed".

Barkley 2 (The Magical Realms of Tír na nÓg: Escape from Necron 7 – Revenge of Cuchulainn: The Official Game of the Movie – Chapter 2 of the Hoopz Barkley SaGa)

Barkley, Shut Up and Jam: Gaiden (2008) was a simple and very funny parody game. The sequel wanted to be more, much more. Its 2012 Kickstarter campaign raised $120,000, promising a complex game set in a large open world, with action-RPG combat, crazy weapons, choices and consequences, tactical baseball, etc.

After years stuck in development hell with few updates, the project was cancelled in 2021. All that was left was a fascinating but very rough "Janky Demo".



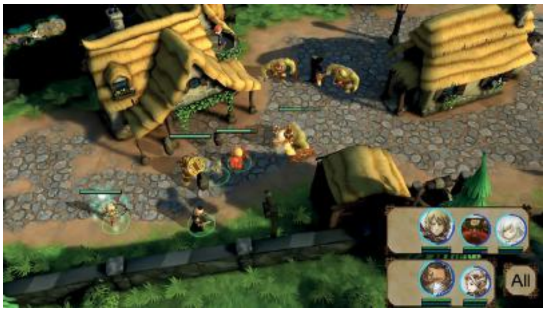
Barkley 2's demo lets you roam a large city with great pixel art and soundtrack, then fight mutated fish in the sewers using a bizarre arsenal of procedurally-generated guns

Project Phoenix

The Kickstarter craze in 2012–2013 led to many failures and disappointments, and *Project Phoenix* was one of the biggest, featuring several veterans from AAA studios and legendary composer Nobuo Uematsu.

Pitched in 2013 as a mix of RTS and JRPG that would set a new standard for Japanese games, it raised over a million dollars. After two years of development, all they had to show was a video of an underwhelming vertical slice, lacking most of the promised features. The game was then delayed to 2018, with the developers moving to make another game first. Any remaining goodwill vanished once an ex-employee accused them of mismanaging the project and lying to backers.

The last update was in March 2019, saying that they are working on other projects, but still intent on rebuilding *Project Phoenix* from the ground up.



A scene from the alpha build video published in December 2014, after almost two years of development

The Secret of the Black Onyx

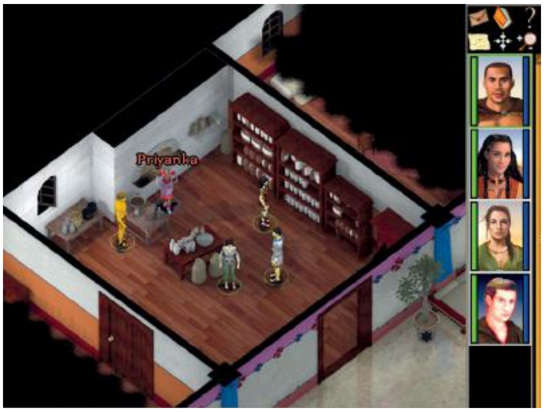
Back in 1984, Henk Rogers created *The Black Onyx*, a game that helped to introduce RPGs to Japan. He then became even more famous for negotiating the *Tetris* licence, allowing it to be released on the GameBoy.

By the mid '90s, he had begun work on a sequel to his game, called *The Secret of the Black Onyx*. For this, he recruited a team of top stars: painters Roger Dean and Michael Embden; comic artist Michael Kaluta; comic writer Elaine Lee; Jaz Coleman and Youth of the band *Killing Joke*; Kendo master Roald Knutsen and Alexey Pazhitnov, the creator of *Tetris*.

Little is known about the actual game – some of the staff involved say it was an RPG, others that it was an adventure game. But it had a "10th Century Russian/Viking Fantasy" story, in which you used cards to interact with the world and battle opponents. Also, it was voxel-based, had a multiplayer mode, and would be part 1 of 6! It was supposed to come out in 1997/1998, but nothing was ever heard about it again.

A render from 3D artist Irina Polishchuk's portfolio, and two scenes from *The Secret of the Black Onyx* videos taken from Elaine Lee's website

The Broken Hourglass



While *The Broken Hourglass* used its own engine, it was clearly inspired by *Baldur's Gate*

Created by a group of long-time *Baldur's Gate* modders, *The Broken Hourglass* was supposed to be an indie successor to the Infinity Engine games.

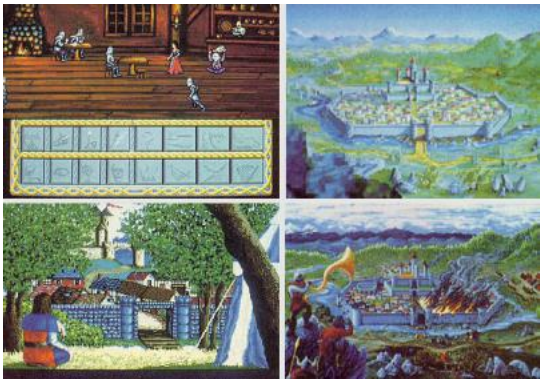
Set in a Byzantine-inspired fantasy world, the whole game occurred inside a city under siege. Like *Baldur's Gate*, it used an RTwP combat system and had various recruitable (and romanceable) NPCs.

Introducing its own original ruleset, it had a very interesting magic system, whereby characters had a limited energy pool and had to allocate it among offensive, defensive and curative spells, as well as power their equipped magic items.

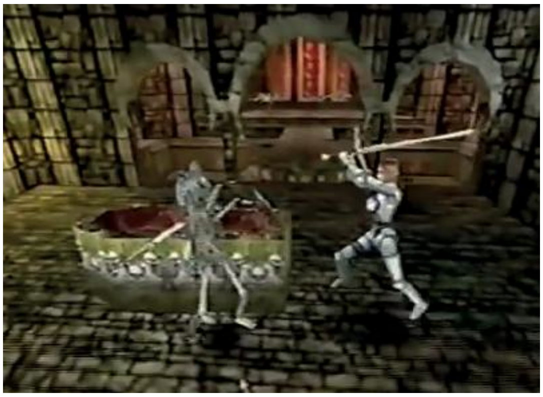
The game began development in 2005 but got cancelled in 2011, with its developers claiming that it was "infeasible to deliver the game promised".

The Bard's Tale IV

This one had many, many incarnations. *Dragon Wars* (1989) was originally intended to be *Bard's Tale IV,* but due to licence issues with EA, Interplay couldn't use the name anymore and had to change the whole game just a few months before release.



Scanned images from the September 1992 issue of PowerPlay, showing EA's *Bard's Tale IV*; it was a full reboot, reportedly titled *Castle of Deception*, tied in with the 1992 Mercedes Lackey novel of the same name



By the end of the '90s, EA's *Bard's Tale IV* project had been rebooted as a 3D action RPG with multiplayer

In 1992, German magazine PowerPlay featured a preview of EA's own *Bard's Tale IV*. According to project manager Rick Lucas, the game was already two years into production and it was huge – the biggest RPG ever. So big that they were considering releasing it in two parts. Dungeon-crawling would still be first-person, but the rest of the world would be explored through a 2D bird's-eye-view camera.

Yet, for all this excitement, the game mysteriously vanished and was never spoken of again.

Over the years, other attempts followed. A leaked internal presentation video shows footage of a 3D *Bard's Tale IV*, planned for a 1999 release. It features multiplayer, random environments and arguably the most ridiculous "boob armour" design ever.

Former Interplay programmer Rebecca "Burger" Heineman revealed in an interview that she tried to pitch a *BTIV* project to EA and never got greenlit.

Another case was *Devil Whiskey*, a 2003 blobber that began as "Bard's Tale IV project", changed names to *Bard's Legacy: Devil Whiskey* after a while and then, in the end, completely dropped the "Bard" part.

By then, Brian Fargo had managed to get the licence back and released *The Bard's Tale* (2004), a parody action RPG with barely any resemblance to the classic dungeon-crawling series.

It was only in June 2015, through a Kickstarter campaign (which raised $1.5M), that Brian Fargo and inXile finally began making the "true" *Bard's Tale IV* – a first-person dungeon crawler with a six-character party and turn-based combat, released in 2018.

Citadel of the Black Sun

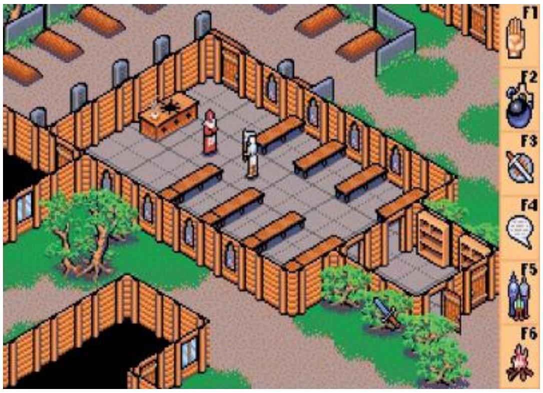
There's not much information on this story, but it is quite a fascinating one. According to developer Teut Weidemann, in 1988 SSI asked German studio Rainbow Arts (famous for *Turrican*), to create a new game for the IBM PC, targeting the US market.

They came up with *Citadel of the Black Sun*, an RPG that looked way ahead of its time. It was fully mouse-driven, with a command bar on the side of the screen, and its inventory had "paper dolls" of the characters, displaying the actual weapon and armour they were wearing (something new at the time).

Furthermore, it used an isometric point of view, complemented by a line-of-sight system – indoor areas were dark unless you were near a door or window.

Teut tells that SSI loved the prototype and wanted it to use their *AD&D* licence, going as far as saying that there were plans to have all future SSI RPGs be based on *Citadel of the Black Sun*'s engine.

However, a love triangle among the developers resulted in Teut departing the company and the project being cancelled soon after. Today, all that remains is an alpha build on his computer and conjectures about the impact such a game could have had on the genre.



Despite the 16-colour limitation of EGA video cards, *Citadel* had striking visuals; the isometric view was rarely used at the time, except in ZX Spectrum games like *Knight Lore* (1984)

Wizardry 8: Stones of Arnhem

The history of the *Wizardry* series is shrouded by weird business choices, lawsuits and Japanese oddities, but this story stands out. In 1992, D.W. Bradley had delivered *Wizardry VII* and left Sir-Tech. For some (likely legal) reason, the company then hired a team in Australia to develop a sequel: *Stones of Arnhem*.

Supposedly, this Australian team included people such as actor Max Phipps and filmmaker Phil Moore. According to an interview with Robert Sirotek, after some years of development the project was going nowhere. Sir-Tech threatened to close it down, but a "crackerjack" programmer named Cleve Mark Blakemore stepped in with a plan to save the project.

In the end, it still failed and the game was canned. An entirely different *Wizardry 8* was later released by another team in 2001, and so *Stones of Arnhem* was all but forgotten.

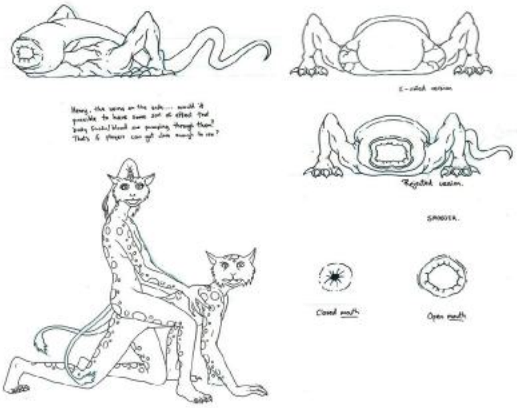
More than 15 years later, an innocent user at the RPG Codex opened a thread asking a simple question, "Why did Sir-Tech go bankrupt?" To answer his question, one Cleve Mark Blakemore emerges and starts wild rants about his work on *Stones of Arnhem*, Sir-Tech's bad management, the mental state of the team and on how the artists were designing oddly sexual creatures – including a "Penissaurus".

His claims were ignored, often ridiculed, some doubting that *Arnhem* had even existed.

Years later, in 2012, an eBay seller named "hotalibl" appeared on that same thread with a bundle of design documents and floppy disks from *Stones of Arnhem*. And they indeed featured Cleve Blakemore. And they indeed featured art of dubious taste.

The auctions were in progress, some items being bid on for more than $1,000, when suddenly everything vanished. It turns out that former Sir-Tech employee Brenda Romero and The Strong Museum contacted the seller, directly acquiring all the documents.

Thus, *Stones of Arnhem* continues to be a mystery. Or, perhaps, it's more of a mystery than ever.



Some of the concept art featured in the *Stone of Arnhem* eBay auctions; also included were several maps, design documents, the game's publishing contract and a CES 1994 demo script

Lists & Further Reading

Everyone loves lists. So we selected some of the most interesting "Best RPG" lists out there, as well as preparing some of our own. And not just RPGs themselves, but also other sources you can consult when looking for information on CRPGs.

There's much more gaming knowledge out there than this book can possibly ever hope to contain, so we listed other books, websites, YouTube channels and resources. There's also a handy glossary, for those new to the genre and, finally, an index to help you quickly find what you're looking for.

A gypsy from *Ravenloft: Strahd's Possession* reads the future of the player's characters

Computer Gaming World's Reader Polls

One of the biggest challenges for videogame historians is how secretive its industry is. While anyone can quickly check the box-office earnings of movies, sales figures for videogames are rarely accessible. Most of the time, only estimates from industry analysts are available, and they can vary wildly from one analyst group to another. The venerable PC magazine *Computer Gaming World* gained some rare insight in the early '80s by directly contacting publishers for sales numbers, but this was a short-lived convenience.

They had much more consistent results with their reader's poll – people would fill out a letter that came with the magazine, rating the games they played and mailing it to the magazine. This poll was the '80s and '90s equivalent of Steam reviews or user scores on Metacritic – extremely flawed, but still an interesting metric to gauge the mood surrounding a game in the US, without the bias of nostalgia.

The first poll was posted in the magazine's 5th issue in July 1982, listing 27 games as rated by 121 readers. The #1 game was *Wizardry* (1981), played by 49% of readers. As a curiosity, 64% of all voters were Apple II users, 26% were Atari 8-bit users, 6% were TRS-80 users, and 4% had other computer systems. Also, 27% of voters admitted to pirating their games.

CGW kept the poll going for nearly two decades, with only a few changes along the way. In 1985's issue #23, they split the games into two categories: 'Strategy' and 'Adventure/Action' – a reminder that game genres were very broad back then. The voting rules changed in 1989's issue #58, when the rating system went from 1–9 to 1–12 (based on an 'F' to 'A+' scale), and the categories were once again combined into a single Top 100 list.

The biggest change would happen in 1996's issue #146, when they adopted 1–10 scores and the magazine began sending the survey to 2,000 random subscribers per month. This was done to counter the distortions of die-hard fans voting for their favourite games every month – and of publishers like Epyx and MicroProse sneaking in votes to promote their games. As the magazine's editor Johnny Wilson explained:

> *"Many a CEO's head has been shaken at the high rating of a wargame that may have only sold 5,000 copies but scores in our Top 10, or at the score of an Amiga game that may not even have been sold in our country."*

Unfortunately, this change happened during a time when Computer RPGs were getting a lot of backlash for being outdated compared to JRPGs and emerging genres like RTS and FPS. It was clear that RPGs weren't as popular anymore – among over a hundred games, there were only 5 or 6 RPGs being rated each month – but the voting change makes it hard to measure this decline in popularity accurately.

This voting format would last until 1999's issue #182 when it was abandoned. On issue #185, it would be replaced by a Top 40 list voted at the magazine's website, using vote count instead of scores. The online votes remained in place until *Computer Gaming World*'s last issue, in November 2006.

Even with all the caveats and rule changes, these polls are fascinating historical documents – although they didn't accurately reflect reality, they still served as a reference for generations of US gamers. The poll results on the following pages are abridged to show only RPGs, so some lists have fewer than ten entries. Since the first poll was from the July 1982 issue, the poll results are from the following July issues, from 1982 to 1999.

You can consult all the magazines with the complete lists at the CGW Museum website.

1982

Issue #5 - July/August

1. Wizardry I: Proving Grounds of the Mad Overlord (8.25)
2. Odyssey: The Compleat Apventure (6.26)
3. SwordThrust (6.21)
4. —
5. —
6. —
7. —
8. —
9. —
10. —

1983

Issue #11 - July

1. Wizardry I: Proving Grounds of the Mad Overlord (8.09)
2. Wizardry II: Knight of Diamonds (7.60)
3. Ultima II: The Revenge of the Enchantress (7.32)
4. Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves (6.60)
5. Ultima I: The First Age of Darkness (6.54)
6. Apventure to Atlantis (6.40)
7. Temple of Apshai (6.28)
8. SwordThrust (5.99)
9. Dungeon! (4.53)
10. —

1984

Issue #17 - August (there was no July issue)

1. Ultima III: Exodus (7.59)
2. Wizardry I: Proving Grounds of the Mad Overlord (7.53)
3. Wizardry III: Legacy of Llylgamyn (7.13)
4. Questron (7.09)
5. Wizardry II: Knight of Diamonds (7.07)
6. Ultima II: The Revenge of the Enchantress (6.81)
7. Ultima I: The First Age of Darkness (6.54)
8. Temple of Apshai (6.28)
9. SwordThrust (5.99)
10. —

1985

Issue #22 - June/July

1. Ultima III: Exodus (7.68)
2. Wizardry III: Legacy of Llylgamyn (7.55)
3. Wizardry I: Proving Grounds of the Mad Overlord (7.50)
4. Questron (7.48)
5. Wizardry II: Knight of Diamonds (7.02)
6. Ultima II: The Revenge of the Enchantress (6.64)
7. —
8. —
9. —
10. —

1986

Issue #29 - June/July

1. Phantasie II (8.00)
2. Ultima IV: Quest of the Avatar (7.79)
3. The Bard's Tale (7.89)
4. Wizardry I: Proving Grounds of the Mad Overlord (7.76)
5. Ultima III: Exodus (7.64)
6. Wizard's Crown (7.47)
7. Phantasie I (7.41)
8. Wizardry II: Knight of Diamonds (7.19)
9. Wizardry III: Legacy of Llylgamyn (7.18)
10. Questron (7.13)

1987

Issue #38 - June/July

1. The Bard's Tale II: The Destiny Knight (8.10)
2. Ultima IV: Quest of the Avatar (7.90)
3. Wizardry I: Proving Grounds of the Mad Overlord (7.73)
4. The Bard's Tale (7.70)
5. Ultima III: Exodus (7.60)
6. Starflight (7.46)
7. Phantasie II (7.39)
8. Might and Magic I: The Secret of the Inner Sanctum (7.35)
9. Wizard's Crown (7.30)
10. Phantasie (7.27)

1988

Issue #49 - July

1. Wasteland (8.27)
2. The Bard's Tale III: Thief of Fate (8.21)
3. Dungeon Master (8.00)
4. Starflight (7.63)
5. Might and Magic I: The Secret of the Inner Sanctum (7.55)
6. The Faery Tale Adventure (7.31)
7. Questron II (7.18)
8. The Bard's Tale II: The Destiny Knight (7.14)
9. Phantasie (7.13)
10. Wizardry III: Legacy of Llylgamyn (7.08)

1989

Issue #61 - July - **NOTE***: From 1989 until 1996 the rating scale changed from 1–9 to 1–12.*

1. Dungeon Master (10.76)
2. The Magic Candle (9.90)
3. Ultima V: Warriors of Destiny (9.56)
4. Wasteland (9.47)
5. Might and Magic II: Gates to Another World (9.24)
6. The Bard's Tale III: Thief of Fate (9.18)
7. Pool of Radiance (9.03)
8. Neuromancer (8.84)
9. BattleTech: The Crescent Hawk's Inception (8.77)
10. The Faery Tale Adventure (8.07)

1990

Issue #73 - July

1. Wasteland (9.04)
2. The Bard's Tale III: Thief of Fate (9.03)
3. Quest for Glory: So You Want to Be a Hero (9.03)
4. Starflight 2: Trade Routes of the Cloud Nebula (9.03)
5. Ultima V: Warriors of Destiny (9.03)
6. Dragon Wars (8.97)
7. Might and Magic II: Gates to Another World (8.81)
8. BattleTech: The Crescent Hawk's Inception (8.77)
9. Neuromancer (8.70)
10. Curse of the Azure Bonds (8.67)

1991

Issue #84 - July

1. Eye of the Beholder (10.03)
2. Ultima VI: The False Prophet (9.43)
3. Wizardry VI: Bane of the Cosmic Forge (9.28)
4. Elvira: Mistress of the Dark (9.13)
5. Quest for Glory II: Trial by Fire (9.10)
6. Wasteland (9.01)
7. Ultima V: Warriors of Destiny (9.01)
8. Quest for Glory: So You Want to Be a Hero (9.00)
9. Dragon Wars (8.87)
10. Starflight 2: Trade Routes of the Cloud Nebula (8.87)

1992

Issue #96 - July

1. Eye of the Beholder II (10.29)
2. Might and Magic III: Isles of Terra (9.68)
3. Eye of the Beholder (9.28)
4. Quest for Glory II: Trial by Fire (9.11)
5. Wizardry VI: Bane of the Cosmic Forge (9.05)
6. Ultima V: Warriors of Destiny (9.00)
7. Quest for Glory: So You Want to Be a Hero (9.00)
8. Wasteland (8.95)
9. Pools of Darkness (8.94)
10. Worlds of Ultima: Martian Dreams (8.89)

1993

Issue #108 - July

1. Ultima Underworld: The Stygian Abyss (10.45)
2. Ultima Underworld II: Labyrinth of Worlds (9.87)
3. Eye of the Beholder II: The Legend of Darkmoon (9.51)
4. Might and Magic III: Isles of Terra (9.41)
5. Ultima VII: The Black Gate (9.34)
6. Might and Magic IV: Clouds of Xeen (9.34)
7. Wizardry VII: Crusaders of the Dark Savant (9.25)
8. Eye of the Beholder (9.10)
9. Wizardry VI: Bane of the Cosmic Forge (9.05)
10. Ultima V: Warriors of Destiny (9.00)

1994

Issue #120 - July

1. Ultima Underworld: The Stygian Abyss (10.22)
2. Betrayal at Krondor (9.63)
3. Lands of Lore: The Throne of Chaos (9.44)
4. Ultima Underworld II: Labyrinth of Worlds (9.42)
5. Might and Magic III: Isles of Terra (9.41)
6. Might and Magic V: Darkside of Xeen (9.37)
7. Eye of the Beholder II: The Legend of Darkmoon (9.34)
8. Might and Magic IV: Clouds of Xeen (9.34)
9. Ultima VII: The Black Gate (9.25)
10. The Elder Scrolls I: Arena (9.19)

1995

Issue #132 - July

1. Betrayal at Krondor (9.44)
2. Ultima Underworld II: Labyrinth of Worlds (9.42)
3. Might and Magic V: Darkside of Xeen (9.37)
4. Lands of Lore: The Throne of Chaos (9.25)
5. Might and Magic IV: Clouds of Xeen (9.11)
6. Ultima VII Part Two: Serpent Isle (9.08)
7. Wolf (8.88)
8. The Elder Scrolls I: Arena (8.85)
9. Veil of Darkness (8.74)
10. Menzoberranzan (8.26)

1996

Issue #144 - July

1. Might and Magic IV: Clouds of Xeen (9.07)
2. Anvil of Dawn (9.04)
3. Ravenloft: Stone Prophet (8.89)
4. Wolf (8.64)
5. Stonekeep (8.44)
6. Menzoberranzan (8.26)
7. Mordor: Depths of Dejenol (8.00)
8. Dark Sun: Wake of the Ravager (7.64)
9. World of Aden: Thunderscape (7.63)
10. Druid: Daemons of the Mind (7.00)

1997

Issue #156 - July - **NOTE**: *Here onwards the rating changes to 1–10 and the games are now voted on by 2,000 random CGW subscribers.*

1. Diablo (8.84)
2. The Elder Scrolls II: Daggerfall (7.53)
3. Anvil of Dawn (7.28)
4. Stonekeep (6.89)
5. Albion (6.17)
6. —
7. —
8. —
9. —
10. —

1998

Issue #168 - July

1. Diablo (8.59)
2. Fallout 1 (8.30)
3. Diablo: Hellfire (8.15)
4. The Elder Scrolls II: Daggerfall (7.19)
5. Anvil of Dawn (7.08)
6. Lands of Lore II: Guardians of Destiny (6.71)
7. Ultima Online (5.68)
8. Meridian 59 (5.09)
9. Descent to Undermountain (4.00)
10. —

1999

Issue #180 - July

1. Baldur's Gate (8.72)
2. Might and Magic VI: The Mandate of Heaven (8.71)
3. Fallout (8.27)
4. Fallout 2 (8.21)
5. Final Fantasy VII (7.98)
6. Diablo: Hellfire (7.81)
7. Return to Krondor (7.00)
8. Dark Earth (6.65)
9. Realms of Arkania III: Shadows over Riva (6.60)
10. Lands of Lore II: Guardians of Destiny (6.16)

Editor's Picks

CRPG History Abridged:
The genre's evolution in 36 iconic games

Highly influential titles that best showcase the advances, trends and changes in the genre over 40 years. Original, revolutionary games are favoured over their often better sequels.

dnd (1975)
Rogue (1980)
Wizardry I: Proving Grounds of the Mad Overlord (1981)
Ultima IV: Quest of the Avatar (1985)
Dragon Quest (1986)
Starflight (1986)
Dungeon Master (1987)
Pool of Radiance (1988)
Wasteland (1988)
Quest for Glory: So You Want to Be a Hero? (1989)
Ultima Underworld: The Stygian Abyss (1992)
Ultima VII: The Black Gate (1992)
Lands of Lore: The Throne of Chaos (1993)
The Elder Scrolls I: Arena (1994)
Diablo (1996)
Final Fantasy VII (1997)
Fallout (1997)
Baldur's Gate (1998)
Might and Magic VI: The Mandate of Heaven (1998)
Jagged Alliance 2 (1999)
Planescape: Torment (1999)
System Shock 2 (1999)
Deus Ex (2000)
Gothic (2001)
The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind (2001)
Neverwinter Nights (2002)
Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic (2003)
Fable (2004)
Mass Effect (2007)
Fallout 3 (2008)
Dragon Age: Origins (2009)
The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim (2011)
Dark Souls (2011)
The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt (2015)
Divinity: Original Sin 2 (2017)
Disco Elysium (2019)

Deep Cuts:
36 hidden gems for those looking for something new

7.62 Hard Life (7.62 High Calibre mod)
A Dance with Rogues (Neverwinter Nights mod)
Barkley, Shut Up and Jam: Gaiden
Bastard Bonds
Betrayal at Club Low
Brigand: Oaxaca
Chinese Paladin 1 (a.k.a. Legend of Sword and Fairy)
D&D: The Rise of Warduke (OpenBOR fan game)
Dungeons of Daggorath
E.Y.E: Divine Cybermancy
Elminage Original
Erannorth Reborn
Grimoire: Heralds of the Winged Exemplar
Hammer & Sickle
Ho Tu Lo Shu: The Books of Dragon
Kamidori Alchemy Meister
Labyrinth of Touhou: Gensokyo and the Heaven-Piercing Tree
Median XL: Ultimative (Diablo II mod)
Mordor: The Depths of Dejenol
Princess Maker 2
Return of Heracles
Sea Dogs: City of Abandoned Ships
Star Control II
Steve Jackson's Sorcery!
Tale of Wuxia
Tales of Maj'Eyal
The Age of Decadence
The Chronicles of Myrtana (Gothic II mod)
The Council
The Dark Heart of Uukrul
The Forgotten City (TES V: Skyrim mod)
The Last Days (Mount & Blade: Warband mod)
The Maimed God Saga (Neverwinter Nights 2 mod)
The Sum/Nous Aurons (Fallout Tactics mod)
Way of the Samurai 4
ZanZarah: The Hidden Portal

RPG Codex's Top 101 CRPGs

From August 4, 2019

A vote conducted with 361 members of the RPG Codex. Each could freely distribute 25 points among what they believed are the best CRPGs ever. Available here - https://rpgcodex.net/content.php?id=11193

1. Planescape: Torment
2. Fallout: A Post-Nuclear Role-Playing Game
3. Baldur's Gate II: Shadows of Amn
4. Arcanum: Of Steamworks and Magick Obscura
5. Vampire: The Masquerade - Bloodlines
6. Fallout 2
7. Fallout: New Vegas
8. Deus Ex
9. Gothic II
10. The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind
11. The Age of Decadence
12. Dark Souls
13. Pathfinder: Kingmaker
14. Jagged Alliance 2
15. The Witcher III: Wild Hunt
16. UnderRail
17. Gothic
18. Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic II - The Sith Lords
19. Baldur's Gate
20. Wizardry 8
21. Neverwinter Nights 2
22. Grimoire: Heralds of the Winged Exemplar
23. System Shock 2
24. Icewind Dale
25. Betrayal at Krondor
26. Pool of Radiance
27. Might and Magic VI: The Mandate of Heaven
28. Shadowrun: Dragonfall - Director's Cut
29. Wizardry VII: Crusaders of the Dark Savant
30. Dragon's Dogma: Dark Arisen
31. Ultima VII: The Black Gate
32. Divinity: Original Sin
33. Divinity: Original Sin 2
34. Kingdom Come: Deliverance
35. Dark Sun: Shattered Lands
36. The Witcher
37. Ultima Underworld I: The Stygian Abyss
38. ELEX
39. Mount & Blade: Warband
40. Might and Magic IV-V: World of Xeen
41. The Temple of Elemental Evil
42. Realms of Arkania II: Star Trail
43. Dragon Age: Origins
44. ATOM RPG: Post-apocalyptic indie game
45. Pillars of Eternity
46. Pillars of Eternity II: Deadfire
47. Wizardry I: Proving Grounds of the Mad Overlord
48. Darklands
49. Battle Brothers
50. Alpha Protocol
51. Ultima IV: Quest of the Avatar
52. NieR: Automata
53. King of Dragon Pass
54. The Elder Scrolls II: Daggerfall
55. Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic
56. Dark Souls II
57. Arx Fatalis
58. Knights of the Chalice
59. Elminage: Gothic
60. Mass Effect
61. Dark Souls III
62. Dungeon Master
63. Might and Magic VII: For Blood and Honor
64. Anachronox
65. Divinity II: The Dragon Knight Saga
66. Kenshi
67. Might and Magic II: Gates to Another World
68. Icewind Dale II
69. Wizardry VI: Bane of the Cosmic Forge
70. Diablo II
71. Neverwinter Nights
72. The Witcher 2: Assassins of Kings
73. Ultima V: Warriors of Destiny
74. The Legend of Heroes: Trails in the Sky
75. Sengoku Rance
76. Diablo
77. NEO Scavenger
78. Deus Ex: Human Revolution
79. Quest for Glory IV: Shadows of Darkness
80. Prey
81. Geneforge
82. Star Control II: The Ur-Quan Masters
83. Expedition: Vikings
84. Wasteland
85. Drakensang: River of Time
86. Space Rangers: HD
87. Heroine's Quest: The Herald of Ragnarok
88. Tales of Maj'Eyal (ToME)
89. Wasteland 2
90. Divine Divinity
91. Gothic 3
92. Realms of Arkania I: Blade of Destiny
93. Ultima Underworld II: Labyrinth of Worlds
94. Undertale
95. Tyranny
96. Might and Magic X: Legacy
97. Ultima VI: The False Prophet
98. Lords of Xulima
99. Pools of Darkness
100. The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion
101. Wizards & Warriors

Rock Paper Shotgun's The 50 best RPGs on PC

From October 11, 2019

Available here - www.rockpapershotgun.com/2019/10/11/best-rpgs/

1. Dark Souls
2. Divinity: Original Sin 2
3. Baldur's Gate II: Shadows of Amn
4. Mass Effect 2
5. Dragon Age: Origins
6. Deus Ex
7. The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt
8. Undertale
9. System Shock 2
10. Planescape: Torment
11. The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind
12. Dark Souls 3
13. Divinity: Original Sin
14. Stardew Valley
15. Dwarf Fortress
16. NieR: Automata
17. Pillars of Eternity
18. Deus Ex: Mankind Divided
19. Vampire: The Masquerade - Bloodlines
20. NEO Scavenger
21. The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim
22. Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic
23. Sunless Skies
24. Fallout: New Vegas
25. Mount & Blade: Warband
26. Legend of Grimrock II
27. Darkest Dungeon
28. Fallout
29. Ultima VII: The Black Gate
30. The Elder Scrolls II: Daggerfall
31. The Banner Saga
32. Anachronox
33. Shadowrun: Dragonfall - Director's Cut
34. UnReal World
35. Din's Curse
36. ADOM - Ancient Domains of Mystery
37. Titan Quest
38. Neverwinter Nights 2: Mask of the Betrayer
39. Brogue
40. King of Dragon Pass
41. Wasteland 2
42. Avernum: Escape From the Pit
43. Wizardry 8
44. Kenshi
45. Recettear: An Item Shop's Tale
46. Torchlight 2
47. Diablo II
48. Risen
49. Monster Hunter: World
50. Hand of Fate

PC Gamer's The best RPGs on PC

From October 21, 2019

Available here - www.pcgamer.com/the-best-rpgs-of-all-time

1. The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt
2. Divinity: Original Sin 2
3. Disco Elysium
4. Pillars of Eternity
5. Outward
6. Sunless Sea
7. South Park: The Stick of Truth
8. Anachronox
9. Kingdom Come: Deliverance
10. Grim Dawn
11. Final Fantasy XII: The Zodiac Age
12. Legend of Grimrock II
13. Undertale
14. Tyranny
15. Path of Exile
16. Darkest Dungeon
17. Mount & Blade: Warband
18. Neverwinter Nights 2
19. Gothic 2
20. The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim
21. Pillars of Eternity 2: Deadfire
22. Ultima Underworld: The Stygian Abyss
23. Divinity: Original Sin
24. Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic II - The Sith Lords
25. Vampire: The Masquerade - Bloodlines
26. Diablo III: Reaper of Souls
27. Arcanum: Of Steamworks and Magick Obscura
28. Fallout: New Vegas
29. Dark Souls 3
30. The Witcher 2: Assassins of Kings
31. Dragon Age: Origins
32. System Shock 2
33. Ultima VII: The Black Gate
34. Deus Ex
35. The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind
36. Mass Effect 2
37. Dark Souls
38. Fallout 2
39. Baldur's Gate II: Shadows of Amn
40. Planescape: Torment
41. Arx Fatalis

XP4T's Best RPGs of the 1980s

From February 5, 2015

In this poll, over 1,000 visitors voted on five games from a list of great RPGs from the '80s.
Available here - www.xp4t.com/the-best-rpgs-of-the-80s-the-results

1. Pool of Radiance
2. Ultima IV: Quest of the Avatar
3. Wasteland
4. The Bard's Tale (Tales of the Unknown: Volume I)
5. Curse of the Azure Bonds
6. Dungeon Master
7. Ultima V: Warriors of Destiny
8. BattleTech - The Crescent Hawk's Inception
9. Might and Magic II: Gates to Another World
10. Star Command
11. Might and Magic I: The Secret of the Inner Sanctum
12. Ultima III: Exodus
13. Wizardry I: Proving Grounds of the Mad Overlord
14. Phantasie III: The Wrath of Nikademus
15. The Bard's Tale III: Thief of Fate
16. Magic Candle
17. Rogue: The Adventure Game
18. The Bard's Tale II: The Destiny Knight
19. Wizardry V: Heart of the Maelstrom
20. Ultima I: The First Age of Darkness

XP4T's Best RPGs of the 1990s

From March 2, 2015

Once again, over 1,000 visitors voted on five games from a list, this time composed of RPGs from the '90s.
Available here - www.xp4t.com/poll-best-pc-rpgs-of-the-1990s

1. Baldur's Gate
2. Planescape: Torment
3. Fallout 2
4. Fallout: A Post-Nuclear Role-Playing Game
5. Diablo
6. System Shock 2
7. The Elder Scrolls II: Daggerfall
8. Ultima VII: The Black Gate
9. Betrayal at Krondor
10. Ultima Underworld: The Stygian Abyss
11. Might and Magic VI: The Mandate of Heaven
12. Final Fantasy VII
13. Wizardry VII: Crusaders of the Dark Savant
14. Neverwinter Nights (AOL)
15. Might and Magic: World of Xeen
16. Dark Sun: Shattered Lands
17. Eye of the Beholder
18. Darklands
19. Ultima Underworld II: Labyrinth of Worlds
20. System Shock

GameStar's The 100 best RPGs on PC

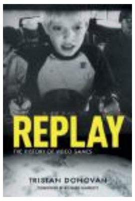
From August 2nd, 2019

GameStar is a traditional PC magazine from Germany. Their list has 100 games; listed below are the top 25.
Available here - www.gamestar.de/artikel/die-100-besten-pc-rollenspiele-aller-zeiten,3346773.html

1. The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt
2. Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic
3. The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim
4. Baldur's Gate II: Shadows of Amn
5. World of Warcraft
6. Mass Effect 2
7. Mass Effect
8. Fallout: New Vegas
9. Baldur's Gate
10. Deus Ex
11. Vampire: The Masquerade - Bloodlines
12. Divinity: Original Sin 2
13. Fallout 2
14. Planescape: Torment
15. Diablo
16. Diablo II
17. Dragon Age: Origins
18. Gothic 2
19. The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion
20. System Shock 2
21. The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind
22. Fallout 3
23. Dark Souls / Dark Souls Remastered
24. Fallout
25. Gothic

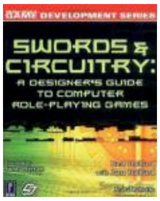
Further Reading

The goal of this book is to be a complete CRPG guide, touching on as many related subjects as possible. This doesn't mean trying to be a definitive source, but rather knowing when something is outside our scope, page count, knowledge or qualifications – and directing you to those who can better provide that detail. Thus, here are some of the best sources of information on our beloved genre:



Tristan Donovan (2010) Replay: The History of Video Games

If you're interested in videogame history as a whole, this is the best book around. Donovan covers everything: arcades, the Apple II, Nintendo, Richard Garriott and *Akalabeth*, MUDs, MMORPGs, the big consoles, indies, local scenes and much more. Almost 50 pages of references and an elaborate gameography makes this a wonderful book for any videogame fan.



Neal Hallford (2001) Swords & Circuitry: A Designer's Guide to Computer Role-Playing Games

Neal Hallford is the legend behind *Betrayal at Krondor*, *Planet's Edge* and *M&M III*, so when he talks about RPGs, you should listen. The book is full of great insights and is a pleasure to read for designers and fans alike. Plus it offers interviews with key game developers and even some design documents from CRPG classics. If you enjoy '80s and '90s RPGs, this book is a delight.

Kurt Kalata (2021) A Guide to Japanese Role-Playing Games

"The JRPG Book", a companion piece to this book, focusing mostly on Japanese console RPGs. Kurt Kalata is the Editor-in-Chief of Hardcore Gaming 101, and in the 650 pages of the book he covers hundreds of JRPGs, from classic series like *Final Fantasy* to obscure gems like *Tengai Makyou* and *Utawarerumono*. It's the best resource on JRPGs available in English.

DIGITAL RETRO

Gordon Laing (2004) Digital Retro - The Evolution and Design of the Personal Computer

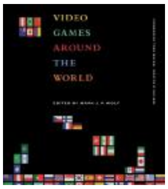
A coffee-table book covering 40 of the most important home computers of the '70s and '80s, such as the C64, Amiga, ZX Spectrum, MSX, Macintosh, etc. Each entry comes with several original photos showing the machines, their internals and accessories, plus historical context and trivia. It doesn't go in-depth or talk about the actual user experience, but it's a joy to flip through.

HIGH SCORE!
EXPANDED
THE ILLUSTRATED HISTORY OF ELECTRONIC GAMES
3RD EDITION
RUSEL DEMARIA

Rusel DeMaria (2018) High Score! Expanded: The Illustrated History of Electronic Games 3rd Edition

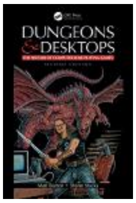
While books like *Replay* will tell you about videogame history, *High Score!* is focused on showing it. It's rather confusingly presented, but that's partly because it crams in thousands of photos, concept art images, box covers, screenshots and ads across its pages. It's a visual time machine that goes from 19th century pinball machines to Dwayne "the Rock" Johnson presenting the original Xbox.

Mark J.P. Wolf (2015) Video Games Around the World



An important complement to other videogame history books, this features 40 essays on gaming across the entire world, including often-overlooked places such as Latin America, Arab and African countries, China, South Korea, India, Russia, the Czech Republic, the Netherlands, etc. 2019's *Video Games and the Global South* is also a great read on this topic, and it's freely available.

Matt Barton & Shane Stacks (2019) Dungeons & Desktops: The History of Computer Role-Playing Games



The inspiration for the book you're currently reading, but with a different focus. Here, Barton goes for a different approach, dividing CRPG history into eras, then personally describing and examining hundreds of titles. Originally released in 2008, the 2nd edition adds Shane Stacks as co-writer, engaging in friendly banter with Barton about the games and their experiences.

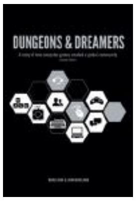
Shannon Appelcline (2014) Designers & Dragons

Originally released as a 300-page book in 2011, *Designers & Dragons* has since been expanded into a large 4-volume set, each tome dedicated to one decade of tabletop RPG history. If you are only interested in *D&D*, check *Dungeons & Dragons Art & Arcana: A Visual History* (2018) for an accessible and gorgeous book, or Jon Peterson's *Playing at the World* (2012) for extremely in-depth research.

David L. Craddock (2015) Dungeon Hacks: How NetHack, Angband, and Other Roguelikes Changed the Course of Video Games

This book fills an important gap, focusing exclusively on the first Roguelikes and the history behind them. It covers *Beneath Apple Manor*, *Rogue, Hack, ADOM, Moria, Angband* and other early entries, providing context to their origins and quotes from their creators.

Brad King (2008) Dungeons & Dreamers: A story of how computer games created a global community

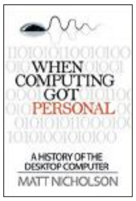


Written like a script for a documentary, this book gives the history of a few iconic games together with the lives of their developers. It focuses heavily on Richard Garriott and the *Ultima* series, but you'll also read amusing stories behind *Colossal Cave*, MUDs, *Doom*, *Counter-Strike* and others.

Jason Schreier (2017) Blood, Sweat, and Pixels: The Triumphant, Turbulent Stories behind How Video Games are Made

A veteran reporter, Jason Schreier explores the stories behind the development of 13 recent games, including *Pillars of Eternity, Diablo III, Dragon Age: Inquisition* and *The Witcher 3*. It's the best book on the market in terms of showing the challenges and complexity of game development.

Matt Nicholson (2014) When Computing Got Personal: A history of the desktop computer



An accessible book that explains some of the most important moments in modern computing, from the first home computers to IBM's battles against clones, the arrival of GUIs and the Internet. It's a great introductory book that does not require you to be an engineer to understand.

CRPG manuals

RTFM! When playing older games, always check the manuals. They went far beyond just explaining game mechanics, such as how *Ultima IV* explained the setting's entire history and *Dusk of Gods* had 50 pages of mythology lessons.

Abandonia - www.abandonia.com

A massive database of over one thousand abandonware MS-DOS games. Each game is accompanied by a review and a few high-quality screenshots, plus a link to where you can buy or download it. Also hosts a collection of gamebooks, music from various games and a selection of recommended software for the retro gamer.

Computer Gaming World Museum - www.cgwmuseum.org

The legendary *CGW* magazine ran from 1981 to 2006, and all the issues are available freely for download on the website. Reading them is like travelling back in time, and it's fun to see all the ads and reviews games had at release.

Game Developer (previously Gamasutra) - www.gamedeveloper.com

A website oriented towards game developers, it hosts articles written by upcoming indies and industry veterans alike. But its highlights are the dozens of post-mortem articles, offering a great behind-the-scenes look at classic games.

GOG.com - www.gog.com

Part of CD Projekt and formerly known as Good Old Games, this is an online store dedicated to DRM-free games, with hundreds of classic games available – all in handy installation packs that configure them to work on modern PCs.

Hardcore Gaming 101 - www.hardcoregaming101.net

Live since 2004, the website offers thousands of in-depth articles on less mainstream games and series, while also publishing quality books on gaming. Be sure to check out their *Wizardry*, *Might and Magic* and *Ultima* articles.

Internet Archive - www.archive.org

One of the most important websites on the Internet, not only does it allow access to literally billions of now-inaccessible web pages, but also provides free access to countless texts, videos, images, music and software. Since 2015, it even allows for in-browser emulation of thousands of MS-DOS games.

Matt Chat - www.youtube.com/user/blacklily8

If you're a fan of classic games, Matt Chat is one of the best things on YouTube. With over 250 weekly episodes, it interviews designers such as Chris Avellone, Richard Garriott, John Romero, Brian Fargo and many others.

MobyGames - www.mobygames.com

Founded in 1999, MobyGames is an extremely useful database containing reviews, ratings, high-quality screenshots, box pictures, release dates, trivia and credits for over 100,000 games from just about every platform.

Mod DB - www.moddb.com

A huge modding website, dating back to 2002, hosting *Half-Life* mods, it still has a very active community, with regular contests and awards. Offers thousands of new mods, as well as classic mods from the 2000s.

Retromags - www.retromags.com

A massive database of scanned game magazines, from *Nintendo Power* in the US to *PC Power* in South Korea or *Game.EXE* in Russia. Serves as a fantastic time machine to see how people were talking about games decades ago.

PC Gaming Wiki - www.pcgamingwiki.com

A wiki devoted to helping people run PC games and fine-tune them. You'll find detailed information on system requirements, retail versions, save-game locations and graphical, input and audio settings for several PC games. There are also guides on which patches to use, useful config tweaks, helpful mods and how to solve common issues.

Replacement Docs - www.replacementdocs.com

Offers scanned versions of manuals, quick-reference sheets, maps and copy-protection codices of pretty much every game out there. Because, remember kids, winners always read the manual.

RogueBasin - www.roguebasin.com

An extensive wiki/database entirely dedicated to Roguelikes. There you'll find detailed entries on virtually every Roguelike out there, plus articles on the genre, guides for aspiring developers and community-hosted events.

RPG Codex - www.rpgcodex.net

The Codex was founded in 2002 by CRPG fans who were tired of seeing their posts deleted from official forums. So, expect a blunt tone and harsh but honest opinions from some of the most passionate CRPG fans you'll ever find.

RPG Watch - www.rpgwatch.net

The Watch is a smaller and more "civil" CRPG forum. Founded in 2006 by editors from the now-extinct RPGDot, they are a tight and friendly group of veterans who will warmly welcome new posters.

The CRPG Addict - www.crpgaddict.blogspot.com

In 2010, Chester Bolingbroke began a blog to record his ambitious project: to play every single CRPG released. He's still going strong, writing detailed posts about each game, with screenshots and trivia, rating the games in various categories and occasionally even attracting comments and discussions with the games' developers.

The Digital Antiquarian - www.filfre.net

Jimmy Maher is the author of *The Future Was Here: The Commodore Amiga*, a 2012 book on the history of the Amiga. After finishing the book, he began this blog, where he regularly posts in-depth articles about classic games.

They Create Worlds - www.theycreateworlds.com

Home of the *They Create Worlds* book by Alex Smith and of the podcast he co-hosts with Jeffrey Daum. The podcast has been going for over 6 years and provides in-depth examinations into several key moments of videogame history.

The Video Game History Hour - www.gamehistory.org/the-video-game-history-hour

A video game history podcast hosted by Frank Cifaldi and Kelsey Lewin, the two co-directors of The Video Game History Foundation. Holds fascinating talks with experts in all kinds of key moments of game history.

Vogons - www.vogons.org

An extremely useful forum dedicated to helping people get their games running correctly, be they old MS-DOS titles, early 3D games or even modern AAA productions.

Glossary

4X: Abbreviation of Explore, Expand, Exploit, Exterminate, it's a subgenre of Strategy games focused on empire-building and large-scale conflicts, such as the Sid Meier's Civilization series.

AD&D: Advanced Dungeons & Dragons, a more complex version of *D&D*. It was first published in 1977, had a 2nd edition in 1989, and ended in 2000, when the 3rd edition fused *AD&D* and *D&D*.

Action RPG (ARPG): RPGs in which player reflexes can be just as important as the character's stats, e.g. *Diablo* and *Dark Souls*.

Alignment: A categorisation of the ethics and morals of characters. The best-known one is the *Dungeons & Dragons* alignment system, which is divided into two axes: Good, Neutral or Evil; and Lawful, Neutral or Chaotic.

Alpha: An early development stage, when content and features are still being implemented.

AoE: Area of Effect; a term used to describe attacks and skills that affect multiple targets inside an area.

BBS: Bulletin Board Service; a type of online message board that was commonly used before the popularisation of the Internet.

Beta: A development stage in which all content and features are present, but they still contain several bugs and issues.

Blobber: Slang for party-based games with a first-person view, such as *Wizardry*, *Dungeon Master* and *Legend of Grimrock*, in which the entire party moves as one, as if it was an amorphous blob.

CGA: Colour Graphics Adapter; a display standard created by IBM in 1981. It could display up to four colours.

CGW: *Computer Gaming World*, a popular and very influential game magazine that was published in the US from 1981 to 2006.

CRPG: Computer Role-Playing Game; term used to differentiate computer RPGs from tabletop RPGs.

CYOA: Choose Your Own Adventure, a series of books in which readers make choices that will determine the outcome of the story. The series began in 1979 and has over 180 published books, becoming synonymous with the entire gamebook genre.

D&D: *Dungeons & Dragons*, the popular tabletop RPG by Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson, first released in 1974.

DLC: Downloadable Content

DPS: Damage Per Second

Dungeon Crawler: An RPG in which you spend most (or all) of your time exploring dungeons. Combat is usually the main focus, e.g. *Wizardry*, *Etrian Odyssey* and *Darkest Dungeon*.

DRM: Digital Rights Management; copy-protection tools used in games, books, music and other online media to avoid piracy.

EGA: Enhanced Graphics Adapter; a display standard created by IBM in 1984. It could display up to 16 colours.

Emulator: Software that simulates a specific hardware, e.g. DOSBox mimics a computer running MS-DOS, allowing users to play games that only run on MS-DOS.

FMV: Full Motion Video; a style of storytelling based on short clips of pre-recorded video, usually with real actors. Enabled by CD-ROMs, it was very popular in the mid-'90s, thanks to games like *The 7th Guest* and *Phantasmagoria*.

FPS: First-Person Shooter; a subgenre of action games where the world is experienced through the eyes of the player character, with a focus on gunplay. Popularised by games like *Wolfenstein 3D* and *Doom*, they were also called "Doom-clones" in the '90s.

Freeware: Software which is 100% free, without any licence or purchase being required.

GUI: Graphical User Interface; term used to indicate modern user interfaces, that use interactive visual elements instead of just text.

Game Master (GM): A person who prepares and executes an adventure for a group of players, presenting challenges, acting as referee and directing the overall experience. Also known as **Dungeon Master (DM)** or Storyteller.

Gold Box: A popular series of CRPGs developed by SSI from 1988 to 1993, based on *AD&D*. The nickname comes from the golden boxes they were usually packaged in.

Grind: Derogatory term for the act of repeatedly fighting the same enemies in order to gain experience, items or gold.

HUD: Heads-Up Display; a part of a game's user interface that is visible during gameplay and displays information such as health, ammo, speed, compass, etc.

HP: Health Points; a numerical system used in RPGs and other games to represent the life energy of a character.

Infinity Engine: A game engine developed by BioWare in 1998. It was used on the Baldur's Gate games and licensed to Interplay's Black Isle, who used it to create *Planescape: Torment* and the Icewind Dale series.

LARP: Live-Action Role-Playing; a type of RPG played by a group of people physically enacting their roles, usually involving costumes and props.

McGuffin: Derogatory term for generic, poorly explained plot devices that the protagonist must pursue – saving a princess, recovering an artefact, etc.

MIDI: Musical Instrument Digital Interface, an audio standard. While MP3 carries audio recordings, MIDI files are actually a series of notes to be played by the computer's virtual instruments. This was used to save space, as MIDI files are much smaller.

MMORPG: Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game; online RPGs with thousands of players sharing the same world. The term was coined by Richard Garriott to differentiate *Ultima Online* (1997) from previous online RPGs, which usually only supported a few dozen players at once.

MUD: Multi-User Dungeon; online virtual worlds where multiple people play together. They are usually text-only, and range from RPGs through adventure games to educational titles.

ROM: Read-Only Memory; a type of computer memory meant only to be read, such as the game files on game cartridges. In the context of emulation, it means a copy of a game's ROM, created in order to be played on an emulator.

NPC: Non-Player Character; refers to all in-game characters not controlled by a player, such as enemies or shopkeepers.

Open-World: Term used to define games that allow players to freely roam a large world, instead of playing through linear levels.

Permadeath: If a character dies, they are deleted – you can't reload. A core feature of Roguelikes, it's often presented in other games as "Hardcore Mode".

Phase-Based: Also know as "We-Go", this is a turn-based combat system in which both players give orders to all their characters at once, then the results are calculated.

Player Character (PC): The character(s) controlled by the player, as opposed to NPCs.

Power Gaming: Playing a game just to win in the most effective way possible, ignoring the characters and story. Also known as "min-maxing" or "munchkin".

Point-Buy: Often used to refer to RPG systems that give players a set number of points in order to "purchase" their stats, skills, talents, etc – such as *Fallout* – instead of using dice-rolls.

Prestige Class: A specialisation that is available once the character meets certain requirements, e.g. to become a Blood Mage in *Dragon Age: Origins*, a mage must first make a pact with a demon.

Procedural Generation: The use of algorithms to generate content such as dungeons or quests. While often confused with randomly-generated content, the content created is not necessarily random.

PvP: Player versus Player; a term for game content or play mode focused on competing against other human players.

QA: Quality Assurance; the team responsible for testing software to ensure it's working as intended and free of bugs.

QTE: Quick Time Event; an in-game event during which players must press a sequence of buttons at the correct time, usually during a cutscene or cinematic sequence.

RNG: Random Number Generator; the algorithm used to simulate dice-rolls and other random in-game events.

RTS: Real-Time Strategy; a subgenre of strategy games based around controlling units and production in real-time.

RTwP: Real Time with Pause; a combat system whereby battles flow in real-time, but can be paused at any time for the player to issue commands. It was popularised by *Baldur's Gate* (1998).

Roguelike: A sub-genre of RPGs that share many core features with *Rogue* (1980), such as permadeath, random maps, turn-based combat and grid-based movement.

Roguelite: A definition created to separate "classic" Roguelikes from games that only share a few features with *Rogue*, such as permadeath or random maps, e.g. *The Binding of Isaac*.

Save-Scumming: A slang term for frequently saving and reloading in order to win a battle or get a rare item.

Shareware: Software which is distributed freely, but comes with some restrictions that are only unlocked by buying the full version, e.g. the shareware version of the original *Doom* (1993) only had one chapter – players had to purchase it to play the rest.

Shovelware: Derogatory term for flawed, low-budget games.

THAC0: To Hit Armour Class Zero; a system from the 1st and 2nd editions of *D&D*. To score a hit, one must roll a value equal or greater to their THAC0, minus the target's Armour Class (AC). Example: If a character has a THAC0 of 8 and his target has an AC of 2, then 8-2 = 6. He must roll 6 or more to hit.

Text Parser: An input system whereby the player types actions or keywords to interact with the game. It was very common in early adventure games and RPGs, before the popularisation of the mouse and GUIs.

UI: User Interface; the means through which the player and the game interact – menus, information displays, controls, etc.

Vancian Magic: A system in which magic-users must read grimoires to memorise spells, which are forgotten once cast (e.g. *D&D* and *Baldur's Gate*). It was inspired by the Dying Earth book series, written by Jack Vance in the '50s.

WASD: A keyboard control scheme based on using the W, A, S and D keys for movement instead of the arrow keys, popularised by *Quake* in the mid-'90s.

VGA: Video Graphics Array; a display standard created by IBM in 1987. It could display up to 256 colours.

XP: Experience Points

References

Bartle, Richard A. (2003) *Designing Virtual Worlds*. San Francisco: New Rider.

Bartle, Richard A. (2016) *MMOs from the Inside Out.* New York: Apress Media.

Barton, Matt (2008) *Dungeons and Desktops: The History of Computer Role-Playing Games.* Wellesley: A.K. Peters.

Barton, Matt (January 31, 2011) *Matt Chat 91: The Fall of Interplay with Brian Fargo*. Matt Chat. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=apg08u6n2YM

Bolingbroke, Chester (2010-2021) *The CRPG Addict*. http://crpgaddict.blogspot.com/

Castronova, Edward (2005) *Synthetic Worlds: The Business and Culture of Online Games.* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Chew, Matthew M. (2016) *A Critical Cultural History of Online Games in China, 1995–2015.* Games and Culture Journal, Volume: 14 issue: 3.

Dal Yong, Jin (2010) *Korea's Online Gaming Empire*. London: The MIT Press.

DeMaria, Rusel (2018) *High Score! Expanded: The Illustrated History of Electronic Games 3rd Edition*. Boca Raton: CRC Press.

Derboo, Sam (July 13, 2010) *A History of Korean Gaming*. Hardcore Gaming 101. http://www.hardcoregaming101.net/korea/korea.htm

Derboo, Sam (May 27, 2011) *A Brief History of Western Action RPGs*. Hardcore Gaming 101. http://blog.hardcoregaming101.net/2011/05/brief-history-of-western-action-rpgs.html

Donovan, Tristan (2010) *Replay: The History of Video Games.* East Sussex: Yellow Ant.

Game About (December 22, 2014) [1995년] 한국RPG의 여명. 그 겨울, '창세기전'이 있었다! [*1995 - War of Genesis and the dawn of Korean RPGs*]. Game About Encyclopedia. https://gameabout.com/krum1/3051630

Gelinas, Ben (2020) *BioWare: Stories and Secrets from 25 Years of Game Development*. Milwaukie: Dark Horse Books.

Grossman, Austin (2003) *Postmortem from Game Developer.* San Francisco: CMP Books.

Gyuhwan, Oh & Taiyoung, Ryu (2007) *Game Design on Item-selling based Payment Model in Korean Online Games.* 2007 DiGRA International Conference: Situated Play The University of Tokyo, September, 2007

Johnson, Ethan (June 7, 2021) *Video Game Sales: 1972-1999.* Gaming Alexandria. https://www.gamingalexandria.com/wp/2021/06/video-game-sales-1972-1999/

Karasev, Viktor (March 23, 2021) *Brief Russian Bootleg Games History.* Russian Video Game Comrade. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MtXxH2JH9OU

Kent, Steven L. (2001) *The Ultimate History of Video Games.* New York: Three Rivers Press.

Korean Game Development & Promotion Institute (2005) *2004 The Rise of Korean Games - Guide to Korean Game Industry and Culture.*

Koster, Raph (April 5th, 2017) *The Online World Timeline.* Raph Koster's Website. https://www.raphkoster.com/games/the-online-world-timeline/

Koyama, Yuhsuke (2020) 日本デジタルゲーム産業史 増補改訂版: ファミコン以前からスマホゲームまで [*The History of Japan's Digital Game Industry - Revised Edition: From before the Famicom to Smartphone games*]. Kyoto: Jimbun Shoin.

Martinsen, Joel (December 26, 2007) *Gamble your life away in ZT Online.* Danwei. https://web.archive.org/web/20181020020926/https://www.danwei.org/electronic_games/gambling_your_life_away_in_zt.php

Media Pal (2013) OLD GAMERS HISTORY Vol.3 ロールプレイングゲーム 1979年~1991年 創世記編. [*The Genesis of Role-Playing Games - 1979 to 1991*]. Tokyo: Media Pal.

Media Pal (2013) OLD GAMERS HISTORY Vol.4 ロールプレイングゲーム 1992年~2000年 百花繚乱編. [*The Blossoming of Role-Playing Games - 1992 to 2000*]. Tokyo: Media Pal.

Messner, Steven (May 23, 2019) *Censorship, Steam, and the explosive rise of PC gaming in China.* PC Gamer. https://www.pcgamer.com/its-time-to-pay-attention-to-china-inside-the-worlds-largest-pc-games-industry/

Morningstar, Chip & Farmer, Randall F. (1990) *The Lessons of Lucasfilm's Habitat.* In Benedikt, Michael (Ed.) Cyberspace: First Steps. Cambridge: MIT Press. https://web.stanford.edu/class/history34q/readings/Virtual_Worlds/LucasfilmHabitat.html

Mulligan, Jessica & Patrovsky, Bridgette (2003) *Developing Online Games: An Insider's Guide.* San Francisco: New Rider.

Nakamura, A. & Wirman, H. (2021) *14. The Development of Greater China's Games Industry: From Copying to Imitation to Innovation.* In O. Sotamaa & J. Svelch (Ed.), Game Production Studies (pp. 275-292). Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.

OECD (2005) *Online Computer and Video Games*. OECD Digital Economy Papers, No. 98. Paris: OECD Publishing. http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/232164517856

Olivetti, Justin (2015-2021) *The Game Archaeologist*. Massively Overpowered. https://massivelyop.com/tag/the-game-archaeologist/

Purchese, Robert (May 15, 2019) *Seeing Red: The story of CD Projekt: How the studio behind* The Witcher *went from a Polish car park to open world glory.* Eurogamer. https://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2013-11-06-seeing-red-the-story-of-cd-projekt

Scorpia (1993) *Scorpia's Magic Scroll of Games - A Survey of Computer Role-Playing Games*. Computer Gaming World #111 - October 1993. Anaheim: Golden Empire Publications.

Scott, Jason (2005) *BBS: The Documentary.* Belmont: Bovine Ignition Systems. https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL7nj3G6Jpv2G6Gp6NvN1kUtQuW8QshBWE

Shah, Rawn & Romine, Jim (1995) *Playing MUDs on the Internet.* New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Sleep, Drew (Ed.) (2021) *The History of Video Games.* London: Future Publishing.

WERTA (June 8, 2018) *Список китайских игр*. [List of Chinese games]. Old-Games.RU. https://www.old-games.ru/Список_китайских_игр

Wheeler, David A. (May 25, 2012) *Scepter of Goth.* David A. Wheeler's Personal Home Page. https://dwheeler.com/scepter-of-goth/scepter-of-goth.html

Wi, Jong H. (2009) *Innovation and Strategy of Online Games.* London: Imperial College Press.

Wolf, Mark J. P. (Ed.)(2015) *Video Games Around the World.* London: The MIT Press.

Woodcock, Bruce S. (2008) *An Analysis of MMOG Subscription Growth.* ION 2008 Presentation. https://web.archive.org/web/20111003195226/http://www.mmogchart.com/downloads/

Woolley, David R. (January 10, 1994) *PLATO: The Emergence of Online Community.* Just Think of It. http://just.thinkofit.com/plato-the-emergence-of-online-community/

Xiaotian, Lu (July 16, 2018) 一对研究生情侣与中国第一款商业化网游. [*Two graduate students and China's first commercial online game*]. Huxiu.com. https://www.huxiu.com/article/252659.html

Yilmaz, Erdal & Cagiltay, Kursat (2005) *History of Digital Games in Turkey.* Digital Games Research Conference 2005, Changing Views: Worlds in Play, June 16-20, 2005, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada.

Zavarise, Giada (October 12, 2017) *The secret history of underdog game engine RPG Maker and how it got its bad reputation.* PC Gamer. https://www.pcgamer.com/the-secret-history-of-underdog-game-engine-rpg-maker-and-how-it-got-its-bad-reputation

DEVELOPER QUOTES

Beneath Apple Manor – Worth, Don (October 12, 2007) Comment #7 on *Beneath Apple Manor* blog post. Psittacine Labs. Archived at http://web.archive.org/web/20110715125304/http://psittacine.com/beneath-apple-manor/

Dungeon Campaign – Clardy, Robert (January 22, 2013) Comment on *Game 83: Dungeon Campaign (1978)* blog post. CRPG Addict. http://crpgaddict.blogspot.com/2013/01/game-83-dungeon-campaign-1979.html?showComment=1358910135018#c1784146838235694813

Akalabeth: World of Doom – Garriott, Richard (November 9, 2011) *What is a Lord British "Ultimate" Role Playing Game?*. Facebook. Archived at https://web.archive.org/web/20170411060811/https://www.facebook.com/note.php?note_id=259507887434380

Eamon – Brown, Donald (1980) *The Wonderful World of Eamon*. Recreational Computing Magazine #46. Menlo Park, CA: People's Computer Company. Archived at https://eamon.wiki/images/8/86/The_Wonderful_World_of_Eamon.pdf

Rogue – Cybergoth (2001) *I talked with Glen Wichman about Rogue!*. The Epyx Shrine. Archived at https://web.archive.org/web/20050402000205/http://home.arcor.de/cybergoth/gamesc/rogueinterview.html

Wizardry: Proving Grounds of the Mad Overlord – Woodhead, Robert (2001) Comment #2567054 on *Sir-tech Canada Releases Wizardry 8*. Slashdot. Archived at https://web.archive.org/web/20150412234709/https://games.slashdot.org/comments.pl?sid=23752&cid=2567054

Ultima – Garriott, Richard (November 9, 2011) *What is a Lord British "Ultimate" Role Playing Game?*. Facebook. Archived at https://web.archive.org/web/20170411060811/https://www.facebook.com/note.php?note_id=259507887434380

Moria – Koeneke, Robert Alan (Februrary 21, 1996) Post on *Early history of Moria* at rec.games.roguelike newsgroup. Archived at https://web.archive.org/web/20150402035005/https://rephial.org/help/version

Ultima III: Exodus – Garriott, Richard (November 26, 2007) *Warren Spector lecture 12 - Richard Garriott*. gamedevthings YouTube Channel. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JBjUdnAt1GM

Questron – Bolingbroke, Chester (October 8, 2015) *Questron: More from the Creator.* CRPG Addict. http://crpgaddict.blogspot.com/2015/10/questron-more-from-creator.html

Adventure Construction Set – Smith, Stuart (April 25, 2013) Comment on *Game 29: Adventure Construction Set (1984)*. CRPG Addict. http://crpgaddict.blogspot.com/2010/10/game-29-adventure-construction-set-1987.html?showComment=1366927852181#c1847850850498786035

The Bard's Tale – *RPG Codex Retrospective Interview: Michael Cranford on Bard's Tale, Interplay, and Centauri Alliance* (September 27, 2013) RPG Codex. http://www.rpgcodex.net/content.php?id=9163

Alternate Reality: The City – Hague, James (1997) *Halcyon Days: Interviews with Classic Computer and Video Game Programmers*. Self-published. Freely available since 2002 at: http://www.dadgum.com/halcyon/index.html

Ultima IV: Quest of the Avatar - Massey, Dana (June 19, 2007) *Richard Garriott: The Escapist Interview*. The Escapist. Archived at https://web.archive.org/web/20151106201749/http://www.escapistmagazine.com/articles/view/video-games/issues/issue_102/563-Richard-Garriott-The-Escapist-Interview

Might and Magic: Book I - Secret of the Inner Sanctum - *RPG Codex Retrospective Interview: Jon Van Caneghem on Might and Magic* (August 18, 2012) RPG Codex. http://www.rpgcodex.net/content.php?id=8379

Ys: The Vanished Omens - 日本ファルコム「イース」チームの巻 *[Nihon Falcom - Ys Developer Interview]* (1989) CHALLENGE!! Personal Computer AVG & RPG III. Tokyo: Dempa Shimbun. Translated by Shmuplations at https://web.archive.org/web/20160317203936/http://shmuplations.com/ys/

NetHack - Cameron, Phill (April 15, 2016) *The story behind NetHack's long-awaited update--the first since 2003.* Gamedeveloper. https://www.gamedeveloper.com/design/the-story-behind-i-nethack-i-s-long-awaited-update--the-first-since-2003

The Faery Tale Adventure - *Amiga Lore talks to David Joiner (Talin)* (May 16, 2012) Amiga Lore. http://www.abime.net/interviews/view/interview/id/71

Dungeon Master - *Interview of the FTL Team* (January 1990) CPU Newswire Online Magazine, Issue No.4.04. Archived at: http://dmweb.free.fr/?q=node/94

Wasteland - Futter, Michael (March 27, 2012) *Brian Fargo Talks Wasteland 2, "Abysmal" Publisher Treatment and Having Fun Again*. Ripten. Archived at https://web.archive.org/web/20120401203827/http://ripten.com/2012/03/27/brian-fargo-talks-wasteland-2-abysmal-publisher-treatment-and-having-fun-again/

Ultima V: Warriors of Destiny - Addams, Shay (1992) *The Official Book of Ultima*, 2nd Ed. Greensboro, NC: Compute Books.

Ultima VI: The False Prophet - Adams, John J. (July 2014) *Interview: Richard Garriott.* Lightspeed #50. Available at http://www.lightspeedmagazine.com/nonfiction/interview-richard-garriott/

Wizardry VI: Bane of the Cosmic Forge - E-mail interview with David D. Bradley, available at https://crpgbook.wordpress.com/2016/08/05/interview-d-w-bradley-on-wizardry-6-7/

J.R.R. Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings, Vol. I - Maher, Jimmy (May 26, 2017) *An Independent Interplay Takes on Tolkien.* The Digital Antiquarian. https://www.filfre.net/2017/05/an-independent-interplay-takes-on-tolkien/

Realms of Arkania: Blade of Destiny - *RPG Codex Retrospective Interview: Guido Henkel on Realms of Arkania* (November 15, 2012) RPG Codex. https://rpgcodex.net/content.php?id=8620

Ultima Underworld: The Stygian Abyss - Rouse III, Richard (2005) *Game Design Theory and Practice, Second Edition.* Plano, TX: Wordware Publishing.

Might and Magic: World of Xeen - *RPG Codex Retrospective Interview: Jon Van Caneghem on Might and Magic* (August 18, 2012) RPG Codex.
http://www.rpgcodex.net/content.php?id=8379

UnReal World - *'There's no end in sight': Lessons from 26 years (and counting) of Unreal World* (March 2, 2016) MCV/Develop.
https://www.mcvuk.com/development-news/theres-no-end-in-sight-lessons-from-26-years-and-counting-of-unreal-world/

Ultima VII: The Black Gate - *"We wanted the game to last forever" – An interview with Raymond Benson* (March 29, 2013) Ultima Codex.
http://ultimacodex.com/interviews/we-wanted-the-game-to-last-forever-an-interview-with-raymond-benson/

Wizardry VII: Crusaders of the Dark Savant - E-mail interview with David D. Bradley, at https://crpgbook.wordpress.com/2016/08/05/interview-d-w-bradley-on-wizardry-6-7/

Darklands - *RPG Codex Retrospective Interview: Arnold Hendrick on Darklands* (June 13, 2012) RPG Codex.
http://www.rpgcodex.net/content.php?id=8246

Princess Maker 2 - 【赤井孝美特集】世界初の育成シミュレーター『プリンセスメーカー』 [*Takami Akai's Special Report - Princess Maker, the world's first raising sim*](July 30, 2012) FreeEX Now! http://blog.freeex.jp/archives/51340781.html

Betrayal at Krondor - Hallford, Neal (February 24, 2016) *Krondor Confidential - Part III.* The many worlds of Neal Hallford.
https://nealhallford.com/post/139902738788/krondor-confidential-part-iii

Ultima VIII: Pagan - *In Garriot's Own Words; Ultima VIII: Pagan* (1998) Gamespot.
Archived at http://web.archive.org/web/19981203093103/http://www.gamespot.com/features/ultima/g13.html

ADOM Ancient Domains of Mystery - Bernohn (September 10, 2013) *Entrevista con Thomas Biskup, el hombre detras de la @ en el juego Adom.* Miniaturas, rol, y más.
http://bernohn.blogspot.com/2013/09/interview-with-thomas-biskup-man-behind.html

Realmz - Chou, Ivans (2001) *An Interview with Tim Phillips.* The personal home page of Ivans Chou.
Archived at http://web.archive.org/web/20070209015718/http://trinity.westhost.com/ichou/what/realmz/interview/TimPhillips.html

The Elder Scrolls: Arena - *Interview with Ted Peterson* (September 4, 2001) Morrowind Italia.
Archived at http://web.archive.org/web/20080314132721/http://italia.planetelderscrolls.gamespy.com/interview2.htm

Exile: Escape from the Pit - Newman, Heather (February 17, 2015) *The original indie dev: How one man made 22 games in 22 years, mostly from his basement.* Venture Beat.
https://venturebeat.com/2015/02/17/the-original-indie-dev-how-one-man-made-22-games-in-22-years-mostly-from-his-basement/

Mordor: Depths of Dejenol - Allen, David (2013) *The Origins of Modern Online Gaming*. Requnix. https://www.requnix.com/the-origins-of-modern-online-gaming

Odyssey: The Legend of Nemesis - Rouse III, Richard (October 31, 2004) *Odyssey - A Remembrance*.
Included in the Freeware version of the game, available at https://www.paranoidproductions.com/odysseydamage.html

The Elder Scrolls II: Daggerfall - Velvin, Sinder (February 2005) *Interview With Ted Peterson.* The Imperial Library.
Available at https://www.imperial-library.info/content/interviews-ted-peterson

Diablo - Yeager, Dave (September 22, 2014) *David Brevik Interview*. RPG Fan.
https://www.rpgfan.com/feature/david-brevik-interview/

Fallout: A Post-Nuclear Role-Playing Game - *RPG Codex Retrospective Interview: Tim Cain on Fallout, Troika and RPG Design (September 4, 2012)* RPG Codex.
https://rpgcodex.net/content.php?id=8416

Final Fantasy VII - Leone, Matt (January 9, 2017) *Final Fantasy 7 - An oral history.* Polygon. https://www.polygon.com/a/final-fantasy-7

Rage of Mages - Jonric (July 7, 2004) *Nival Interactive Interview.* IGN. https://www.ign.com/articles/2004/07/06/nival-interactive-interview

Baldur's Gate - Meer, Alec (August 16, 2010) *Not Forgotten: Bioware On Baldur's Gate*. Rock Paper Shotgun.
http://www.rockpapershotgun.com/2010/08/16/not-forgotten-bioware-on-baldurs-gate/

Might and Magic VI: The Mandate of Heaven - Jonric (1998) *Jon Van Caneghem Interview.* Vault Network.
Archived at https://web.archive.org/web/19991112190738/http://www.vaultnetwork.com/features/interviews/caneghem.shtml

Fallout 2 - *Interview with Chris Avellone* (March 8, 2006) RPG Codex. https://rpgcodex.net/content.php?id=125

Jagged Alliance 2 - *Jagged Alliance 2 interview with Ian Currie* (April 7, 2010) Jagged Alliance Galaxy.
Archived at: https://web.archive.org/web/20130407100720/http://www.jagalaxy.com/index.php/news/interviews/3030-jagged-alliance-2-interview-with-ian-currie.html

Planescape: Torment - Stringer, Johnathan (2014) *RPGamer Feature - Chris Avellone Interview.* RPGamer.
https://archive.rpgamer.com/features/2014/interviews/chrisavelloneint.html

Ultima IX: Ascension - *"An Inertia of Legend" — An Interview with Bill Randolph* (November 11, 2014) Ultima Codex.
http://ultimacodex.com/interviews/an-inertia-of-legend-an-interview-with-bill-randolph/

Konung: Legend of the North - Email exchange with the author.

Omikron: The Nomad Soul - Cage, David (February 22, 2013) *Masterclass de David Cage.* Cité des Sciences et de l'Industrie. Available at https://www.cite-sciences.fr/fr/ressources/autour-du-jeu-video/masterclass/masterclass-de-david-cage
Translation available at https://www.neogaf.com/threads/translation-of-david-cages-february-2013-masterclass-warning-wall-of-text.964900/

System Shock 2 - *System Shock 2 roundtable interview with developers Jon Chey and Dorian Hart* (August 22, 2013) PC Invasion.
http://www.pcinvasion.com/system-shock-2-roundtable-interview-with-developers-jon-chey-and-dorian-hart

Deus Ex - Spector, Warren (December 6, 2000) *Postmortem: Ion Storm's Deus Ex.* Game Developer.
https://www.gamedeveloper.com/design/postmortem-ion-storm-s-i-deus-ex-i-

Baldur's Gate II: Shadows of Amn - *Baldur's Gate II Five-Year Anniversary Interview* (September 22, 2005) Game Banshee.
http://www.gamebanshee.com/interviews/28229-baldurs-gate-ii-five-year-anniversary-interview.html

Diablo II - Schaefer, Erich (October 25, 2000) *Postmortem: Blizzard's Diablo II*. Game Developer.
https://www.gamedeveloper.com/design/postmortem-blizzard-s-i-diablo-ii-i-

Vampire: The Masquerade - Redemption - Keighley, Geoff (June 9, 2001) *Vampire: the Masquerade - Redemption Interview*. Gamespot.
Archived at http://web.archive.org/web/20010609122219/http://gamespot.com/gamespot/features/pc/vampire_interview/index.html

Evil Islands: Curse of the Lost Soul - *Evil Islands: Curse of the Lost Soul Interview* (April 5, 2001) IGN.
https://www.ign.com/articles/2001/04/04/evil-islands-curse-of-the-lost-soul-interview

Icewind Dale - *Icewind Dale/Icewind Dale II Interview* (March 16, 2000) Game Banshee.
http://www.gamebanshee.com/interviews/28279-icewind-daleicewind-dale-ii-interview-v15-28279.html

Wizardry 8 - *Interview with Brenda Garneau* (1998) The Gaming Nexus.
Archived at http://www.zimlab.com/wizardry/recovered//bg/bg3.htm

Anachronox - *Anachronox Interview* (October 4, 2000) IGN. https://www.ign.com/articles/2000/10/04/anachronox-interview

Arcanum: Of Steamworks & Magick Obscura - *RPG Codex Retrospective Interview: Tim Cain on Fallout, Troika and RPG Design* (September 4, 2012) RPG Codex. http://www.rpgcodex.net/content.php?id=8416

Gothic - *Gothic Interview* (June 29, 1999) IGN Vault. Archived at http://web.archive.org/web/20030115143340/http://rpgvaultarchive.ign.com/features/interviews/gothic.shtml

Severance: Blade of Darkness - Lázaro, Ricardo (Februrary 20, 2013) *Entrevista a José Luis Vaello*. The Vault.
Archived at http://web.archive.org/web/20130222013153/http://thevault.es/entrevista-a-jose-luis-vaello

Geneforge - Van Beest, A.J. (December 4, 2001) *Geneforge.* Inside Mac Games.
Archived at https://web.archive.org/web/20050324010019/http://www.insidemacgames.com/previews/view.php?ID=49

Divine Divinity - *Swen Vincke talks to the Codex* (February 6, 2012) RPG Codex. http://www.rpgcodex.net/content.php?id=7982

The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind - Kollar, Phil (2012) *The Man Behind the Fantasy*. Game Informer #225 - January 2012.

Arx Fatalis - Fudge, James (September 9, 2003) *Arx Fatalis Xbox Interview*. Gameshark.com
Archived at http://web.archive.org/web/20040411051626/http://www.gameshark.com/xbox/articles/438212p1.html

Neverwinter Nights - Butts, Steve (April 24, 2002) *Neverwinter Nights Interview.* IGN. https://www.ign.com/articles/2002/04/24/neverwinter-nights-interview-2

Freedom Force - Haynes, Jeff (June 27, 2009) *The Past, Present and Future of Freedom Force.* IGN.
https://www.ign.com/articles/2009/06/26/the-past-present-and-future-of-freedom-force

Dungeon Siege - Barton, Matt (September 18, 2011) *Matt Chat 116: Total Annihilation and Dungeon Siege with Chris Taylor.* Matt Chat.
Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B10VzNIf3gg

Gothic II - Jonric (May 13, 2006) *Gothic 3 Interview.* IGN. https://www.ign.com/articles/2006/05/13/gothic-3-interview

Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic - Looney, Russ (July 11, 2013) *10 Years of KOTOR: An Interview with Lead Designer James Ohlen*. The Game Agent. Archived at https://web.archive.org/web/20130724083725/http://blog.gameagent.com/10-years-of-kotor-lead-designer-james-ohlen-interview/

TRON 2.0 - Rooke, Frank (September 10, 2003) *Postmortem: Monolith's TRON 2.0.* Gamasutra.
https://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/2810/postmortem_monoliths_tron_20.php

SpellForce: The Order of Dawn - Jonric (December 10, 2003) *SpellForce - The Order of Dawn Interview, Part 1*. IGN.
https://www.ign.com/articles/2003/12/10/spellforce-the-order-of-dawn-interview-part-1

Temple of Elemental Evil - *Temple of Elemental Evil interview* (January 13, 2003) RPG Codex. http://www.rpgcodex.net/content.php?id=31

Sacred - Batchelor, Carl (April 12, 2014) *Unbended Interview – The New RPG from the Former Ascaron Devs.* Niche Gamer.
https://nichegamer.com/unbended-interview-the-new-rpg-from-the-former-ascaron-devs/

Fable - Faylor, Chris (March 21, 2008) *The Peter Molyneux Interview, Part 2: From Fable 2 to Peter Molyneux.* Shacknews. https://www.shacknews.com/article/51873/the-peter-molyneux-interview-part

Space Rangers 2: Dominators - *Space Rangers 2 Interview* (Feburary 21, 2006) Gamecloud. Archived at http://web.archive.org/web/20170314001304/http://www.gamecloud.com/article.php?article_id=3588

Vampire: The Masquerade - Bloodlines - Rossignol, Jim (April 6, 2009) *Interview Without A Vampire: Bloodlines' B Mitsoda*. Rock Paper Shotgun. http://www.rockpapershotgun.com/2009/04/06/interview-without-a-vampire-bloodlines-b-mitsoda/

The Legend of Heroes: Trails in the Sky - Spencer (May 26, 2011) *Falcom President Reflects On Trails In The Sky, Talks About Series Future.* Siliconera. Archived at https://web.archive.org/web/20110809053744/https://www.siliconera.com/2011/05/26/falcom-president-reflects-on-trails-in-the-sky-talks-about-series-future/

Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic II - The Sith Lords - Avellone, Chris (October 14, 2009) *Kotor II Questions*. Obsidian Forum Community. https://forums.obsidian.net/blog/1/entry-120-kotor-ii-questions/

Super Columbine Massacre RPG! - Ledonne, Danny (2005) *ARTIST'S STATEMENT: A Meditation on Super Columbine Massacre RPG!* http://www.columbinegame.com/statement.htm

Jade Empire - Blyth, Jon (June 10, 2007) *Looking Back… Jade Empire*. PC Zone Magazine. Archived at https://web.archive.org/web/20130928210253/http://www.computerandvideogames.com/165623/interviews/looking-back-jade-empire/

Dwarf Fortress - Fenlon, Wes (April 10, 2016) *Dwarf Fortress' creator on how he's 42% towards simulating existence*. PC Gamer. https://www.pcgamer.com/dwarf-fortress-creator-on-how-hes-42-towards-simulating-existence/

Dungeon Crawl: Stone Soup - *The Last and Final Word: Linley Henzell* (2011) Quote Unquote. http://quote-un-quote.tumblr.com/post/2178789666/interview-with-shmup-legend-linley-henzell

Gothic 3 - *Interview* (2006) World of Gothic. https://www.worldofgothic.de/gothic3/index.php?go=interview15

Neverwinter Nights 2 - *Neverwinter Nights 2 interview* (April 27, 2007) RPG Codex. http://www.rpgcodex.net/content.php?id=147

Dark Messiah: Might and Magic - *Q&A with Arkane* (October 10, 2006) Celestial Heavens. https://www.celestialheavens.com/q-a-with-arkane

Mass Effect - Karpyshyn, Drew (October 9, 2015) *Hi, Reddit! I'm fantasy author Drew Karpyshyn! AMA!*. Reddit. https://www.reddit.com/r/Fantasy/comments/3nztf8/comment/cvt7p3l/?utm_source=share&utm_medium=web2x&context=3

S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow of Chernobyl - Rossignol, Jim (December 10, 2007) *S.T.A.L.K.E.R. I.N.T.E.R.V.I.E.W.* Rock Paper Shotgun. https://www.rockpapershotgun.com/stalker-interview

Neverwinter Nights 2: Mask of the Betrayer - *The Man Behind the Mask – An interview with George Ziets* (March 21, 2015) Grimuar Sferowca. http://grimuar.pl/interview/george-ziet

The Witcher - *A few words with Michal Kicinski, Co-Founder of CD Projekt* (April 29, 2009) RPG Codex. http://www.rpgcodex.net/content.php?id=189

7.62 High Calibre - *Apeiron on 7.62 & Brigade E5* (Februrary 16, 2007) Tacticular Cancer. http://www.tacticularcancer.com/content.php?id=31

Eschalon: Book I - Jonric (August 9, 2006) *Eschalon: Book I Interview.* IGN. http://www.ign.com/articles/2006/08/09/eschalon-book-i-interview

Fallout 3 - Remo, Chris (October 13, 2008) *Falling Into Fallout 3: Director Todd Howard Talks Scope And Evolution.* Gamasutra. http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/132209/falling_into_fallout_3_director_.php

Drakensang: The Dark Eye - *Drakensang: The Dark Eye Q&A* (September 27, 2006) Gameguru. https://www.ggmania.com/full.php3?show=5810

Dragon Age: Origins - Pucik, David (August 24, 2009) *Interview with Dragon Age: Origins lead writer, David Gaider*. Tor.com. http://www.tor.com/2009/08/24/interview-with-ligdragon-age-originslig-lead-writer-david-gaider/

Risen - Killpower (August 24, 2014) *Interview Piranha Bytes*. RPG France. Archived at https://web.archive.org/web/20200516190312/http://www.rpgfrance.com/dossier-10279-1-interview-pyranha-bytes

Torchlight - Lenhardt, Heinrich (January 24, 2012) *Diablo co-creator's quest for "the $20 AAA game"*. Venture Beat. https://venturebeat.com/2012/01/24/diablo-co-creators-quest-for-the-20-aaa-game-exclusive-interview/

Knights of the Chalice - *Knights of the Chalice Interview with Pierre Begue* (March 1, 2010) RPG Codex. https://rpgcodex.net/content.php?id=199

Borderlands - Jenkins, David (July 13, 2012) *Borderlands 2 preview and interview – load of Claptrap*. Metro. https://metro.co.uk/2012/07/13/borderlands-2-preview-and-interview-load-of-claptrap-494985/

Caves of Qud - Bucklew, Brian & Grinblat, Jason (July 19, 2015) *r/roguelikes Developer AMA*. Reddit. https://www.reddit.com/r/roguelikes/comments/3drjoz/rroguelikes_developer_ama_uunormal_and/

Alpha Protocol: The Espionage RPG - Sterling, Jim (August 5, 2009) *Interview: Chris Avellone on Alpha Protocol*. Destructoid. http://www.destructoid.com/interview-chris-avellone-on-alpha-protocol-142906.phtml

Fallout: New Vegas - Kelly, Kevin (May 5, 2010) *Interview: Josh Sawyer on Fallout: New Vegas*. Engadget.
http://www.engadget.com/2010/05/05/interview-josh-sawyer-on-fallout-new-vegas/

Mass Effect 2 - Nutt, Christian (January 25, 2010) *Back In Space: BioWare On Mass Effect 2*. Gamasutra.
http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/132639/back_in_space_bioware_on_mass_.php

E.Y.E: Divine Cybermancy - Szczepaniak, John (May 17, 2013) *Q&A on EYE: Divine Cybermancy with Streum-On-Studio.* Gamasutra.
http://www.gamasutra.com/blogs/JohnSzczepaniak/20130517/192484/QA_on_EYE_Divine_Cybermancy_with_StreumOnStudio.php

Dark Souls - Dutton, Fred (January 22, 2013) *Demon's Souls' creator looks back at the making of an RPG classic*. Playstation Blog.
http://blog.eu.playstation.com/2013/01/22/demons-souls-creator-looks-back-at-the-making-of-an-rpg-classic/

The Witcher 2: Assassins of Kings - *The Witcher 2: Enhanced Edition Interview* (May 4, 2012) RPGamer.
Archived at https://web.archive.org/web/20120722213904/https://rpgamer.com/games/witcher/witcher2/witcher2eeint.html

Way of the Samurai 4 - Spencer (August 20, 2012) *How Demon's Souls Inspired Way Of The Samurai 4 And Other Development Stories.* Siliconera.
Archived at https://web.archive.org/web/20160908235154/https://www.siliconera.com/2012/08/20/how-demons-souls-inspired-way-of-the-samurai-4-and-other-development-stories/

The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim - Howard, Todd (February 8, 2012) *Why we Play, Why we Create.* D.I.C.E. Summit Opening Keynote.
Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7awkYKbKHik

Deus Ex: Human Revolution - Remo, Chris (July 26, 2010) *Inciting A (Human) Revolution: The Deus Ex Interview.* Gamasutra.
https://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/5930/inciting_a_human_revolution_the_.php

Mass Effect 3 - Hudson, Casey (March 17, 2012) *Casey Hudson on the Conclusion of Mass Effect 3.* BioWare Forums.
Archived at http://web.archive.org/web/20160731230547/https://forum.bioware.com/topic/286183-casey-hudson-on-the-conclusion-of-mass-effect-3/

Tales of Maj'Eyal - Wolfe, John (February 24, 2017) *Death at the Hands of DarkGod: ToME 4 Breathes Life Into Roguelikes.* Frame/Rate.
Archived at https://web.archive.org/web/20190824151838/http://www.frame-rate.com/death-hands-darkgod-tome-4-breathes-life-roguelikes/

Legend of Grimrock - *Rolling Independent: Almost Human Games Interview* (January 16, 2012) Game Banshee.
http://www.gamebanshee.com/interviews/106442-rolling-independent-almost-human-games-interview.html

Kingdoms of Amalur: Reckoning - Anderson, Daniel (April 19, 2011) *Interview - Ken Rolston*. Click Online.
Archived at https://web.archive.org/web/20130509031531/http://www.clickonline.com/games/interview--ken-rolston/936/

Dragon's Dogma - Roberts, Samuel (January 8, 2016) *Dragon's Dogma devs on bringing the 2012 RPG to PC.* PC Gamer.
https://www.pcgamer.com/dragons-dogma-devs-on-bringing-the-2012-rpg-to-pc/

Diablo III - Benson, Julian (November 2, 2015) *It took 20 minutes for Blizzard to decide to kill the Diablo 3 auction house*. PCGamesN.
https://www.pcgamesn.com/diablo-iii/it-took-20-minutes-for-blizzard-to-decide-to-kill-the-diablo-3-auction-house

Shadowrun Returns - *Interview: Jordan Weisman talks Shadowrun, Battletech, and what keeps him going* (July 21, 2017) GOG.
Archived at https://web.archive.org/web/20200627120940/https://www.gog.com/news/interview_jordan_weisman

Path of Exile - *Diabloii.net interview with Path of Exile's Chris Wilson: The Diablo Podcast #221* (October 19, 2017) The Diablo Podcast.
https://www.diabloii.net/blog/comments/path-of-exile-interview-chris-wilson-podcast

The Banner Saga - *Developer Interview: Stoic* (September 11, 2018) Game Pilgrim. https://gamepilgrim.com/2018/09/11/developer-interview-stoic/

NEO Scavenger - Fedor, Daniel (December 15, 2014) Post #22 at *NEO Scavenger Officially Released* forum thread. RPG Codex.
http://www.rpgcodex.net/forums/index.php?threads/neo-scavenger-officially-released.95927/#post-3648556

Dragon Age: Inquisition - Schreier, Jason (2017) *Blood, Sweat, and Pixels: The Triumphant, Turbulent Stories Behind How Video Games Are Made.*
New York, NY: Harper.

Wasteland 2 - ValH (February 17, 2017) *Brian Fargo and Chris Keenan Interview*. GameBanshee.
https://www.gamebanshee.com/news/118513-brian-fargo-and-chris-keenan-interview.html

The Witcher III: Wild Hunt - *Creating The Witcher's World: An Interview with Marcin Blacha of CD Projekt Red* (December 23, 2016) Culture.pl.
https://culture.pl/en/article/creating-the-witchers-world-an-interview-with-marcin-blacha-of-cd-projekt-red

The Age of Decadence - Kain, Erik (March 14, 2013) *'Age Of Decadence' Developer Talks Indie Game Design, Old-School RPGs.* Forbes.
https://www.forbes.com/sites/erikkain/2013/03/14/age-of-decadence-developer-talks-indie-game-design-old-school-rpgs/?sh=4561321611b8

Fallout 4 - O'Dwyer, Danny & Kish, Mary (June 15, 2016) *Todd Howard Talks Modding at Bethesda - E3 2016*. Gamespot.
https://www.gamespot.com/videos/todd-howard-talks-modding-at-bethesda-e3-2016/2300-6432858/

Pillars of Eternity - *RPG Codex Interview: Eric Fenstermaker on Pillars of Eternity* (March 6, 2016) RPG Codex.
https://rpgcodex.net/content.php?id=10231

Darkest Dungeon - ranarif (October 3, 2019) *Interview with Chris Bourassa, co-founder of Red Hook Studios and Creative Director of Darkest Dungeon.* Dark RPGs.
https://darkrpgs.home.blog/2019/10/03/interview-with-chris-bourassa-co-founder-of-red-hook-studios-and-creative-director-of-darkest-dungeon/

NieR: Automata - Girard-Meli, Jowi (March 12, 2017) *Exclusive Interview: Yoko Taro On Machine Empathy And Butts In Nier: Automata.* We Got This Covered. https://wegotthiscovered.com/gaming/interview-yoko-taro-nier-automata/3/

Divinity: Original Sin 2 - Vincke, Swen (March 31, 2017) *Divinity: Original Sin 2*. EGX 2017 Developer Sessions. Available at https://youtu.be/6CSB3ZNRXmE

Nioh - Powell, Kai (January 19, 2021) *Nioh 2: The Complete Edition Interview With Team Ninja's Fumihiko Yasuda.* WCCF TECH. https://wccftech.com/nioh-2-the-complete-edition-interview-with-team-ninjas-fumihiko-yasuda/

Battle Brothers - Taaks, Jan (May 2, 2015) Comment #8 at *Pride will have a fall* at Steam Community forums. https://steamcommunity.com/app/365360/discussions/0/620712364030169263/#c620712364030685990

Dragon Quest XI: Echoes of an Elusive Age - Nutt, Christian (May 27, 2011) *25 Years Of Dragon Quest: An Interview With Yuji Horii.* Game Developer. https://www.gamedeveloper.com/business/25-years-of-i-dragon-quest-i-an-interview-with-yuji-horii

Pillars of Eternity II: Deadfire - Sawyer, Josh (May 27, 2019) *Breaking the Mold RPG Evolution.* Digital Dragons. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xChOXFJ83-g

Kingdom Come: Deliverance - Campbell, Colin (April 24, 2015) *Giving life to the 15th Century Bohemia in Kingdom Come: Deliverance*. Polygon. https://www.polygon.com/features/2015/4/24/8445617/kingdom-come-deliverance-interview-preview

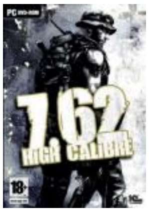
Pathfinder: Kingmaker - Gibson, Alex (January 14, 2020) *Pathfinder: Wrath of the Righteous Interview: New Gameplay Changes, Better Tutorials, & More*. Twinfinite. https://twinfinite.net/2020/01/pathfinder-wrath-of-righteous-interview-improving-accessibility-changes-to-combat-kingdom-building-more/

Slay the Spire - Couture, Joel (January 22, 2020) *Road to the IGF: Mega Crit Games' Slay the Spire.* Game Developer. https://www.gamedeveloper.com/disciplines/road-to-the-igf-mega-crit-games-i-slay-the-spire-i-

Disco Elysium - Izual (May 1st, 2019) Disco Elysium, entretien avec Robert Kurvitz [Disco Elysium, interview with Robert Kurvitz]. Canard PC. https://www.canardpc.com/394/disco-elysium-entretien-avec-robert-kurvitz

Game Index
& Cover Gallery

7.62 High Calibre
2007
pg. 398



ADOM Ancient Domains of Mystery
1994
pg. 208

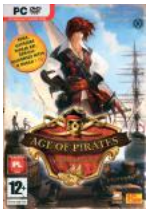
Aarklash: Legacy
2013
pg. 487

Academagia: The Making of Mages
2010
pg. 448

Adventure Construction Set
1984
pg. 72

Agarest: Generations of War
2007
pg. 394

Age of Pirates: Caribbean Tales
2006
pg. 382



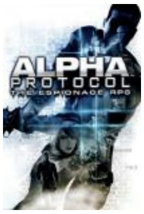
Akalabeth: World of Doom
1979
pg. 46

Al-Qadim: The Genie's Curse
1994
pg. 210

Albion
1995
pg. 228

Alien Fires 2199 A.D.
1987
pg. 105

Alpha Protocol: The Espionage RPG
2010
pg. 442



Alter Ego
1986
pg. 92

Alternate Reality: The City
1985
pg. 80

Ambermoon
1993
pg. 187

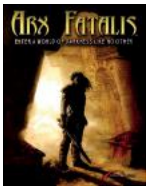
Amberstar
1992
pg. 186

An Elder Scrolls Legend: Battlespire
1997
pg. 239

Anachronox
2001
pg. 298

Anvil of Dawn
1995
pg. 232

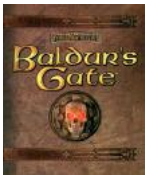
Arcanum: Of Steamworks & Magick Obscura
2001
pg. 300



Arx Fatalis
2002
pg. 314

Autoduel
1985
pg. 86

B.A.T.
1989
pg. 131



Baldur's Gate
1998
pg. 254

Baldur's Gate II: Shadows of Amn
2000
pg. 282

Barkley, Shut Up and Jam: Gaiden
2008
pg. 403

Battle Brothers
2017
pg. 546

BattleTech: The Crescent Hawk's Inception
1988
pg. 116

Beneath Apple Manor
1978
pg. 40

Betrayal at Krondor
1993
pg. 196

Betrayal in Antara
1997
pg. 248

Birthright: The Gorgon's Alliance
1997
pg. 238

Black Crypt
1992
pg. 180

Blackguards
2014
pg. 496

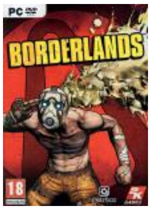
BloodNet
1993
pg. 195

Bloodwych
1989
pg. 130

Boiling Point: Road to Hell
2005
pg. 364

BOILINGPOINT
ROAD TO HELL

Borderlands
2010
pg. 432


BORDERLANDS

Bound by Flame
2014
pg. 490

BOUND BY FLAME

Captive
1990
pg. 144

Card Hunter
2013
pg. 488

Castle of the Winds
1989
pg. 123

Castle Of The Winds I
A Question Of Vengeance

Cataclysm: Dark Days Ahead
2013
pg. 486

Cataclysm
Dark Days
Ahead

Caves of Qud
2010
pg. 436

CAVES
OF QUD

Champions of Krynn
1990
pg. 145

Advanced Dungeons & Dragons
CHAMPIONS OF KRYNN
SSI

Chinese Paladin
1995
pg. 626

Circuit's Edge
1990
pg. 141

CIRCUIT'S EDGE

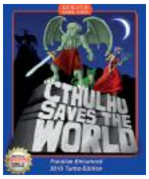
Cobra Mission: Panic in Cobra City
1991
pg. 154

Cobra
Mission

Crypt of the NecroDancer
2015
pg. 509

CRYPT OF THE NECRODANCER

Cthulhu Saves the World
2010
pg. 440


CTHULHU SAVES THE WORLD

Cultist Simulator
2018
pg. 558

Cultist
Simulator

CyberMage: Darklight Awakening
1995
pg. 219

Dark Messiah: Might and Magic
2006
pg. 384

Dark Messiah
Might and Magic

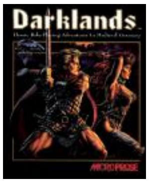
Dark Souls
2011
pg. 452

Dark Sun: Shattered Lands
1993
pg. 200

DARK SUN
SHATTERED LANDS
SSI

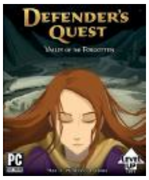
Darkest Dungeon
2016
pg. 530

Darkest
Dungeon



Darklands
1992
pg. 184

Deathlord
1987
pg. 96



Defender's Quest: Valley of the Forgotten
2012
pg. 475

Descent to Undermountain
1997
pg. 252

Desktop Dungeons
2010
pg. 435

Deus Ex
2000
pg. 280

Deus Ex: Human Revolution
2011
pg. 462

Deus Ex: Invisible War
2003
pg. 342

Dex
2015
pg. 528

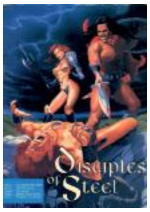
Diablo
1997
pg. 240

Diablo II
2000
pg. 286

Diablo III
2012
pg. 476

Dink Smallwood
1998
pg. 245

Din's Curse
2010
pg. 434



Disciples of Steel
1991
pg. 158

Disco Elysium
2019
pg. 572

Divine Divinity
2002
pg. 310

Divinity II: Ego Draconis
2009
pg. 415

Divinity: Original Sin
2014
pg. 491

Divinity: Original Sin 2
2017
pg. 538

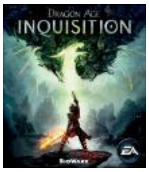
Dragon Age:
Origins
2009
pg. 416

Dragon Age
Origins

Dragon Age II
2011
pg. 461

Dragon Age II

Dragon Age:
Inquisition
2014
pg. 502


Dragon Age
Inquisition

Dragon Quest
XI: Echoes of an
Elusive Age
2017
pg. 550

Definitive Edition

Dragon Wars
1989
pg. 117

Dragon Wars

Dragon's
Dogma
2012
pg. 472

Dragon's Dogma
Dark Arisen

Dragon's Eye
1981
pg. 58

Dragon's Eye

Drakensang:
The Dark Eye
2008
pg. 408

PC DVD
Drakensang

Drakkhen
1989
pg. 119

Dream Quest
2014
pg. 493

Dungeon
Campaign
1978
pg. 42

Synergistic Software
Dungeon Campaign

Dungeon Crawl:
Stone Soup
2006
pg. 374

Dungeon Crawl
Stone Soup

Dungeon Hack
1993
pg. 203

Forgotten Realms
Dungeon Hack

Dungeon
Master
1987
pg. 102

Dungeon Master

Dungeon Siege
2002
pg. 324

Dungeon Siege

Dungeons
& Dragons:
Shadow over
Mystara
1996
pg. 233

Dungeons & Dragons
Shadow over Mystara

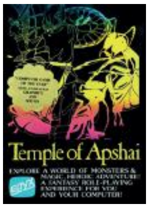
Dungeons of
Daggorath
1982
pg. 59

Dungeons of Daggorath
Tandy

Dungeons of
Dredmor
2011
pg. 449

Dungeons of Dredmor

Dunjonquest:
Temple of
Apshai
1979
pg. 44


Temple of Apshai

Dwarf Fortress
2006
pg. 368

Dwarf Fortress
Bay 12 Games

E.V.O.: The Theory of Evolution
1990
pg. 627

E.Y.E: Divine Cybermancy
2011
pg. 450

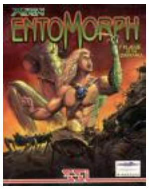
ELEX
2017
pg. 544

EAMON
BASIC SET

Eamon
1980
pg. 50

Elona
2007
pg. 395

Elvira: Mistress of the Dark
1990
pg. 137


ENTOMORPH
SSI

Entomorph: Plague of the Darkfall
1995
pg. 225

Epic Battle Fantasy
2009
pg. 428

ESCAPE FROM HELL

Escape from Hell
1990
pg. 151

Eschalon
BOOK I

Eschalon: Book I
2007
pg. 400

1С ИГРОТЕКА
Проклятые земли

Evil Islands: Curse of the Lost Soul
2000
pg. 292

Exile
Escape from the Pit

Exile: Escape from the Pit
1995
pg. 222

EXPEDITIONS
CONQUISTADOR

Expeditions: Conquistador
2013
pg. 489

EXPEDITIONS
VIKING

Expeditions: Viking
2016
pg. 532

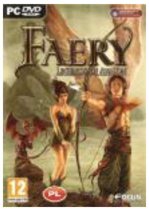
Advanced Dungeons & Dragons
Eye of the Beholder
SSI

Eye of the Beholder
1991
pg. 152

FTL
FASTER THAN LIGHT

FTL: Faster Than Light
2012
pg. 478

Fable
2004
pg. 346


PC DVD
FAERY
12

Faery: Legends of Avalon
2010
pg. 441

Fallout: A Post-Nuclear Role-Playing Game
1997
pg. 242

Fallout 2
1998
pg. 258

Fallout 3
2008
pg. 406

Fallout 4
2015
pg. 522

Fallout: New Vegas
2010
pg. 444

Fate
2005
pg. 366

Fate: Gates of Dawn
1991
pg. 157

Final Fantasy VII
1997
pg. 246

Forgotten Realms: Unlimited Adventures
1993
pg. 204

Fortune Summoners: Secret of the Elemental Stone
2008
pg. 410

Freedom Force
2002
pg. 322

Gates of Skeldal
1998
pg. 633

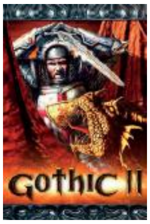
Gateway to the Savage Frontier
1991
pg. 163

Geneforge
2001
pg. 306

Gorky 17
1999
pg. 271

Gothic
2001
pg. 302

Gothic II
2002
pg. 326



Gothic 3
2006
pg. 378

GreedFall
2019
pg. 570

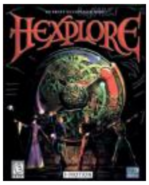
Grim Dawn
2016
pg. 535

GuJian 3
2018
pg. 560

Hand of Fate
2015
pg. 525

Hellgate: London
2007
pg. 402

Heroine's Quest: The Herald of Ragnarok
2013
pg. 483



Hexplore
1998
pg. 253

Hillsfar
1989
pg. 122

Hired Guns
1993
pg. 199

Ho Tu Lo Shu: The Books of Dragon
2018
pg. 629

Hylics
2015
pg. 514

Hyper-dimension Neptunia - Re;Birth1
2013
pg. 482

Icewind Dale
2000
pg. 294

Icewind Dale II
2002
pg. 316

Ishar: Legend of the Fortress
1992
pg. 176

J.R.R. Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings, Vol. I
1990
pg. 142

Jade Empire
2005
pg. 362

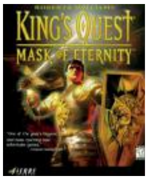
Jagged Alliance 2
1999
pg. 262

Kamidori Alchemy Meister
2011
pg. 632

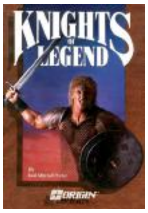
Kenshi
2018
pg. 559

Kingdom Come: Deliverance
2018
pg. 562

Kingdoms of Amalur: Reckoning
2012
pg. 470



King's Quest: Mask of Eternity
1998
pg. 260

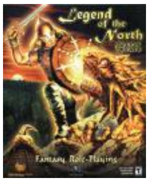


Knights of Legend
1989
pg. 128

Knights of Xentar
1991
pg. 155

Knights of the Chalice
2009
pg. 426

Konung: Legend of the North
1999
pg. 268


Legend of the North
Fantasy Role-Playing

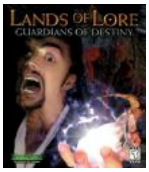
Kult: Heretic Kingdoms
2004
pg. 343

KULT
HERETIC KINGDOMS

LISA: The Painful
2014
pg. 508

Lands of Lore: The Throne of Chaos
1993
pg. 202

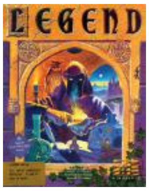
Lands of Lore II: Guardians of Destiny
1997
pg. 244


LANDS OF LORE
GUARDIANS OF DESTINY

Legend of Grimrock
2012
pg. 468

LEGEND OF
GRIMROCK

Legend
1992
pg. 170



Lionheart: Legacy of the Crusader
2003
pg. 333

PC CD-ROM
LIONHEART
18+

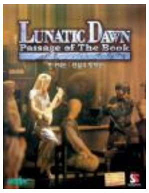
Lords of Xulima
2014
pg. 500

LORDS OF XULIMA

Lords of the Fallen
2014
pg. 501

LORDS FALLEN

Lunatic Dawn: Passage of the Book
1997
pg. 631


LUNATIC DAWN
Passage of The Book

Magical Diary
2011
pg. 460

Magical Diary

Marauder
2009
pg. 425

Mass Effect
2007
pg. 386

MASS EFFECT

Mass Effect 2
2010
pg. 446

MASS EFFECT 2

Mass Effect 3
2012
pg. 464

MASS EFFECT 3

Mass Effect: Andromeda
2017
pg. 548

MASS EFFECT ANDROMEDA

Mega-Traveller: The Zhodani Conspiracy
1990
pg. 146

MEGATRAVELLER 1
THE ZHODANI CONSPIRACY

Might and Magic: Book I - Secret of the Inner Sanctum
1986
pg. 88

Might and Magic III: Isles of Terra
1991
pg. 160

Might and Magic: World of Xeen
1992
pg. 168

Might and Magic VI: The Mandate of Heaven
1998
pg. 256

Might and Magic VII: For Blood and Honor
1999
pg. 270

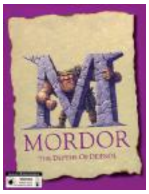
Might and Magic VIII: Day of the Destroyer
2000
pg. 285

Might and Magic IX
2002
pg. 317

Might and Magic X
2014
pg. 492

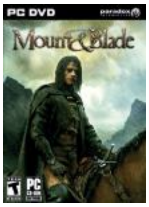
Monster Hunter: World
2018
pg. 556

Moraff's World
1991
pg. 156



Mordor: Depths of Dejenol
1995
pg. 226

Moria
1983
pg. 64



Mount & Blade
2008
pg. 412

Mystery Chronicle: One Way Heroics
2015
pg. 519

NEO Scavenger
2014
pg. 498

NetHack
1987
pg. 98

Neuromancer
1988
pg. 109

Neverwinter Nights
2002
pg. 318

Neverwinter Nights 2
2006
pg. 380

Neverwinter Nights 2: Mask of the Betrayer
2007
pg. 392

Neverwinter Nights 2: Storm of Zehir
2008
pg. 414

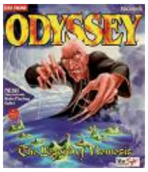
Neverwinter Nights 2
Storm of Zehir
Expansion Pack
PC
ATARI

NieR: Automata
2017
pg. 536

NieR:Automata

Nioh
2017
pg. 542

Odyssey: The Legend of Nemesis
1996
pg. 234


ODYSSEY
The Legend of Nemesis

Of Orcs and Men
2012
pg. 474

Omega
1988
pg. 108

welcome
to
omega

Omikron: The Nomad Soul
1999
pg. 272

omikron
The Nomad Soul
eidos

Outward
2019
pg. 567

Paper Sorcerer
2013
pg. 479

Paper Sorcerer

Path of Exile
2013
pg. 484

PATH OF EXILE

Pathfinder: Kingmaker
2018
pg. 564

PATHFINDER
KINGMAKER

Perihelion: The Prophecy
1993
pg. 191

PERIHELION

Phantasie
1985
pg. 82

PHANTASIE
SSI
STRATEGIC SIMULATIONS, INC.

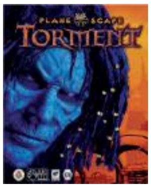
Pillars of Eternity
2015
pg. 526

PILLARS OF ETERNITY
OBSIDIAN

Pillars of Eternity II: Deadfire
2018
pg. 554

PILLARS OF ETERNITY II
DEADFIRE
ULTIMATE EDITION

Planescape: Torment
1999
pg. 264


PLANESCAPE
TORMENT

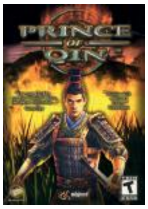
Pool of Radiance
1988
pg. 110

Advanced Dungeons & Dragons
POOL OF RADIANCE
SSI
STRATEGIC SIMULATIONS, INC.

Pool of Radiance: Ruins of Myth Drannor
2001
pg. 308

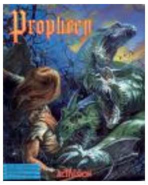
POOL OF RADIANCE
RUINS OF MYTH DRANNOR
Ubi Soft

Prince of Qin
2002
pg. 328


PRINCE of QIN

Princess Maker 2
1993
pg. 192

NEC
Princess Maker 2



Prophecy I: The Fall of Trinadon
1989
pg. 118

PUZZLE QUEST

Puzzle Quest: Challenge of the Warlords
2007
pg. 388

Pyre
2017
pg. 549

PRELUDE TO DARKNESS

Pyrrhic Tales: Prelude to Darkness
2002
pg. 329

Quarterstaff

Quarterstaff
1987
pg. 93

Quest for Glory I
So You Want To Be A Hero
SIERRA

Quest for Glory: So You Want to Be a Hero
1989
pg. 124

Quest for Glory
SHADOWS of DARKNESS
SIERRA

Quest for Glory: Shadows of Darkness
1993
pg. 188

QUESTRON
A fantasy Adventure Game

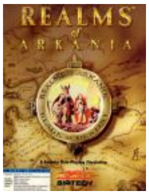
Questron
1984
pg. 70

RAGE OF MAGES

Rage of Mages
1998
pg. 250

Ravenloft
STONE PROPHET
SSI

Ravenloft: Stone Prophet
1995
pg. 220


REALMS
of
ARKANIA
SIR-TECH

Realms of Arkania: Blade of Destiny
1992
pg. 164

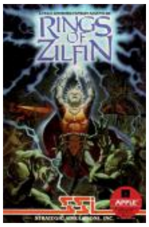
Realmz
1994
pg. 212

EasyGameStation
RECETTEAR

Recettear: An Item Shop's Tale
2007
pg. 389

Return to Krondor

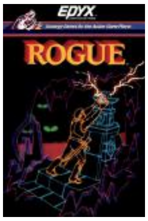
Return to Krondor
1998
pg. 249


RINGS OF ZILFIN
SSI
APPLE

Rings of Zilfin
1986
pg. 87

Games for Windows
DVD
RISEN

Risen
2009
pg. 420



Rogue
1980
pg. 52

PC DVD
S.T.A.L.K.E.R.
THQ

S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow of Chernobyl
2007
pg. 390

KONAMI
SD
SNATCHER

SD Snatcher
1990
pg. 625

Sacred
2004
pg. 344

Salt and Sanctuary
2016
pg. 533

Sengoku Rance
2006
pg. 377

Septerra Core: Legacy of the Creator
1999
pg. 261

Seventh Sense
2008
pg. 411

Severance: Blade of Darkness
2001
pg. 304

Shadow-Caster
1993
pg. 190

Shadow-lands
1992
pg. 181

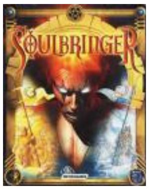
Shadowrun Returns
2013
pg. 480

Siege of Avalon
2000
pg. 284

Silver
1999
pg. 276

Slay the Spire
2019
pg. 568

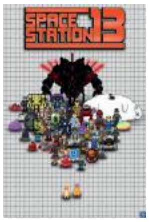
Soulbringer
2000
pg. 277



South Park: The Stick of Truth
2014
pg. 504

Space Rangers 2: Dominators
2004
pg. 348

Space Station 13
2003
pg. 334



SpellForce: The Order of Dawn
2003
pg. 338

SpellForce 2: Shadow Wars
2006
pg. 376

SpellForce III
2017
pg. 545

Spirit of Excalibur
1990
pg. 148

Star Control 2
1992
pg. 182

STAR SAGA:ONE
BEYOND THE BOUNDARY

Star Saga: One: Beyond the Boundary
1988
pg. 112

STAR WARS
KNIGHTS
OLD REPUBLIC

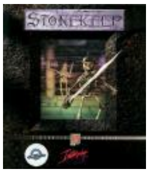
Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic
2003
pg. 330

STAR WARS
KNIGHTS
II
THE SITH LORDS

Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic II - The Sith Lords
2004
pg. 356

STARFLIGHT

Starflight
1986
pg. 90



Stonekeep
1995
pg. 230

STUDIO 3DO
STRIFE
90%

Strife: Quest for the Sigil
1996
pg. 231

PC DVD-ROM
SUDEKI
16+

Sudeki
2004
pg. 350

Summoner
THQ

Summoner
2000
pg. 290

SUNLESS SEA

Sunless Sea
2015
pg. 524

Super Columbine
Massacre RPG!

Super Columbine Massacre RPG!
2005
pg. 360

Superhero
LEAGUE
HOBOKEN

Superhero League of Hoboken
1994
pg. 211

SWORD COAST
LEGENDS

Sword Coast Legends
2015
pg. 529

Sword of Moonlight: King's Field Making Tool
2000
pg. 630

SWORDS AND
SANDALS
GLADIATOR

Swords and Sandals: Gladiator
2006
pg. 370

system shock
2

System Shock 2
1999
pg. 274

TRON 2.0
2003
pg. 336

Tale of Wuxia
2015
pg. 520

Tales of Maj'Eyal

Tales of Maj'Eyal
2012
pg. 466

TELENGARD
microcomputer games inc.

Telengard
1982
pg. 60

PC CD-ROM
THE TEMPLE OF
ELEMENTAL
EVIL
16+

Temple of Elemental Evil
2003
pg. 340

The Age of Decadence
2015
pg. 516

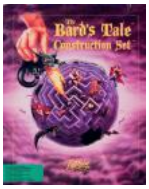
The Banner Saga
2014
pg. 494

The Bard's Tale
1985
pg. 78

The Bard's Tale
2004
pg. 351

Bard's Tale
Bonus
PC

The Bard's Tale Construction Set
1991
pg. 162


Bard's Tale
Construction Set

The Battle for Wesnoth
2003
pg. 332

Battle for Wesnoth

The Caverns of Freitag
1982
pg. 62

The Caverns of Freitag
MUSE

The Council
2018
pg. 553

THE COUNCIL

The Dark Heart of Uukrul
1989
pg. 126

The Elder Scrolls: Arena
1994
pg. 214

The Elder Scrolls
ARENA

The Elder Scrolls II: Daggerfall
1996
pg. 236

DAGGERFALL

The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind
2002
pg. 312

The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion
2006
pg. 372

The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim
2011
pg. 458

The Faery Tale Adventure
1987
pg. 100

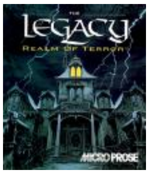
The Immortal
1990
pg. 136

The Immortal

The Last Remnant
2008
pg. 404

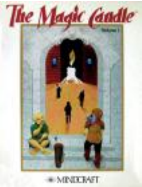
LAST REMNANT
16

The Legacy: Realm of Terror
1993
pg. 198


LEGACY
REALM OF TERROR
MICROPROSE

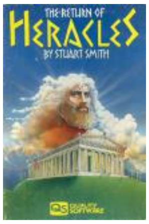
The Legend of Cao Cao
1998
pg. 628

The Legend of Heroes: Trails in the Sky
2004
pg. 354



The Magic Candle
1989
pg. 120

The Outer Worlds
2019
pg. 571



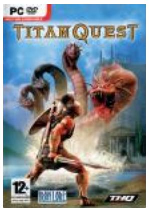
The Return of Heracles
1983
pg. 66

The Summoning
1992
pg. 171

The Witcher
2007
pg. 396

The Witcher 2: Assassins of Kings
2011
pg. 454

The Witcher III: Wild Hunt
2015
pg. 512



Titan Quest
2006
pg. 367

Torchlight
2009
pg. 422

Torment: Tides of Numenera
2017
pg. 552

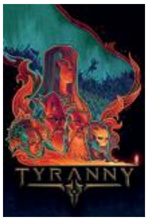
Tower of Time
2017
pg. 541

Transistor
2014
pg. 497

Tunnels & Trolls: Crusaders of Khazan
1990
pg. 140

Tunnels of Doom
1982
pg. 63

Two Worlds II
2010
pg. 438



Tyranny
2016
pg. 534

Ultima
1981
pg. 56

Ultima II: Revenge of the Enchantress
1982
pg. 61

Ultima III: Exodus
1983
pg. 68

Ultima IV: Quest of the Avatar
1985
pg. 84

Ultima V: Warriors of Destiny
1988
pg. 114

Ultima V
Warriors of Destiny

Ultima VI: The False Prophet
1990
pg. 134

Ultima VI
The False Prophet

Ultima VII: The Black Gate
1992
pg. 174

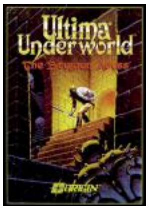
Ultima VII
THE BLACK GATE

Ultima VIII: Pagan
1994
pg. 206

PAGAN
Ultima VIII

Ultima IX: Ascension
1999
pg. 266

Ultima Underworld: The Stygian Abyss
1992
pg. 166


Ultima Underworld
The Stygian Abyss

UnReal World
1992
pg. 172

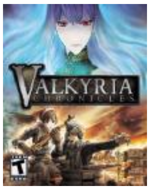
UnReal World
www.unrealworld.fi

UnderRail
2015
pg. 515

Undertale
2015
pg. 518

Unrest
2014
pg. 505

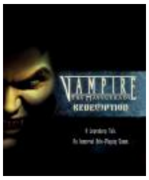
Valkyria Chronicles
2008
pg. 405


VALKYRIA
CHRONICLES

Vampire: The Masquerade - Bloodlines
2004
pg. 352

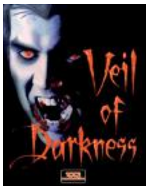
VAMPIRE
THE MASQUERADE
BLOODLINES

Vampire: The Masquerade - Redemption
2000
pg. 288


VAMPIRE
THE MASQUERADE
REDEMPTION

Vampyr
2018
pg. 566

Veil of Darkness
1993
pg. 194


Veil of Darkness

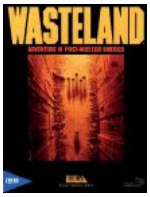
Venetica
2009
pg. 419

VENETICA
12
16

Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War II
2009
pg. 418

DAWN OF WAR
16+
THQ

Wasteland
1988
pg. 106



Wasteland 2
2014
pg. 506

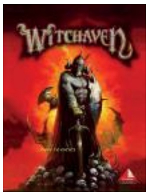
WASTELAND 2
DIRECTOR'S CUT

Way of the Samurai 4
2011
pg. 456

PC DVD
侍道4
WAY OF THE SAMURAI 4
18

West of Loathing
2017
pg. 540

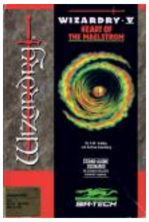
Windwalker
1989
pg. 127



Witchaven
1995
pg. 218

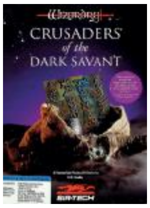
Wizardry: Proving Grounds of the Mad Overlord
1981
pg. 54

Wizardry IV: The Return of Werdna
1987
pg. 97



Wizardry V: Heart of the Maelstrom
1988
pg. 113

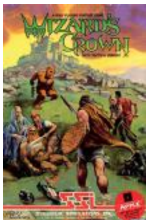
Wizardry VI: Bane of the Cosmic Forge
1990
pg. 138



Wizardry VII: Crusaders of the Dark Savant
1992
pg. 178

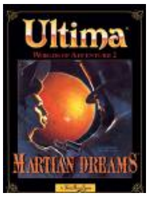
Wizardry 8
2001
pg. 296

Wizards & Warriors
2000
pg. 291



Wizard's Crown
1985
pg. 76

World of Aden: Thunder-scape
1995
pg. 224



Worlds of Ultima: Martian Dreams
1991
pg. 161

Worlds of Ultima: The Savage Empire
1990
pg. 150

Ys: The Vanished Omens
1987
pg. 94

Yumina the Ethereal
2009
pg. 424

ZanZarah: The Hidden Portal
2002
pg. 309

Zeliard
1987
pg. 104

First edition published in 2019 by Bitmap Books Ltd.
Expanded Edition published in 2023 by Bitmap Books Ltd.

Cover art by Jan Pospíšil (www.janpospisil.daportfolio.com)

Copyright © Bitmap Books Ltd. and Felipe Pepe 2023

The Author and Publisher have used their very best endeavours to obtain express permission for the reproduction in this book of all third-party copyright material. If you can show that you own copyright in any material reproduced in this book and that we have not obtained permission from you for its inclusion, please get in touch with us.

A digital record for this book is available from the British Library. All Rights Reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, or stored in any retrieval system of any nature, without prior written permission, except for permitted fair dealing under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 (as amended) or other applicable law. Application for permission should be made to the publisher.

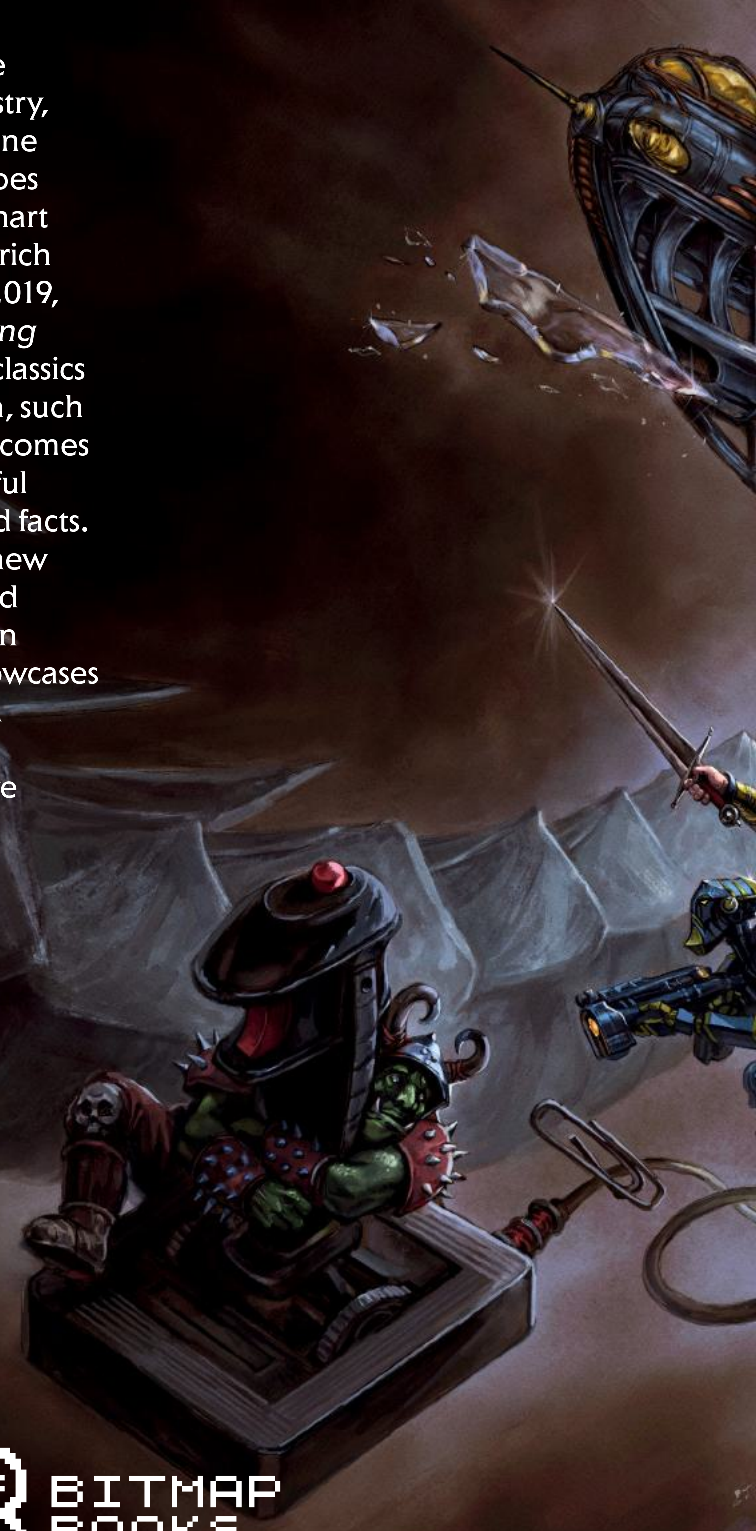
All games featured are the property of the copyright owners. Their images have been used respectfully purely for review purposes.

To get in touch, please email us at hello@bitmapbooks.com

Accept no imitations ... we are the world's no. 1!

"A Magnificent Love Letter To Computer RPGs" *Forbes*

A genre that can chart its origins right back to the very dawn of the interactive entertainment industry, the humble role-playing adventure is arguably one of the most influential and most-played game types in the history of the medium. This book aims to chart that astonishing lineage in its hundreds of detail-rich pages. Covering the period between 1975 and 2019, *The CRPG Book: A Guide to Computer Role-Playing Games* highlights more than 450 seminal genre classics covering decades of development and evolution, such as *Ultima*, *Wizardry*, *Fallout* and *Mass Effect*, and comes complete with eye-catching screenshots, insightful quotes from developers, and intriguing trivia and facts. This Expanded Edition adds 156 new pages, 56 new game reviews, several new articles, a lot of revised content and a glorious cover-art gallery. A passion project written by fans for fans, this book also showcases contributions from the likes of Chris Avellone, Ian Frazier, Richard Cobbett, George Weidman and Tim Cain, and represents the most comprehensive look at the beloved RPG ever published.



ISBN 978-1-8384585-7-7
9 781838 458577 >

VOCÊ EM AÇÃO.

BITMAP BOOKS